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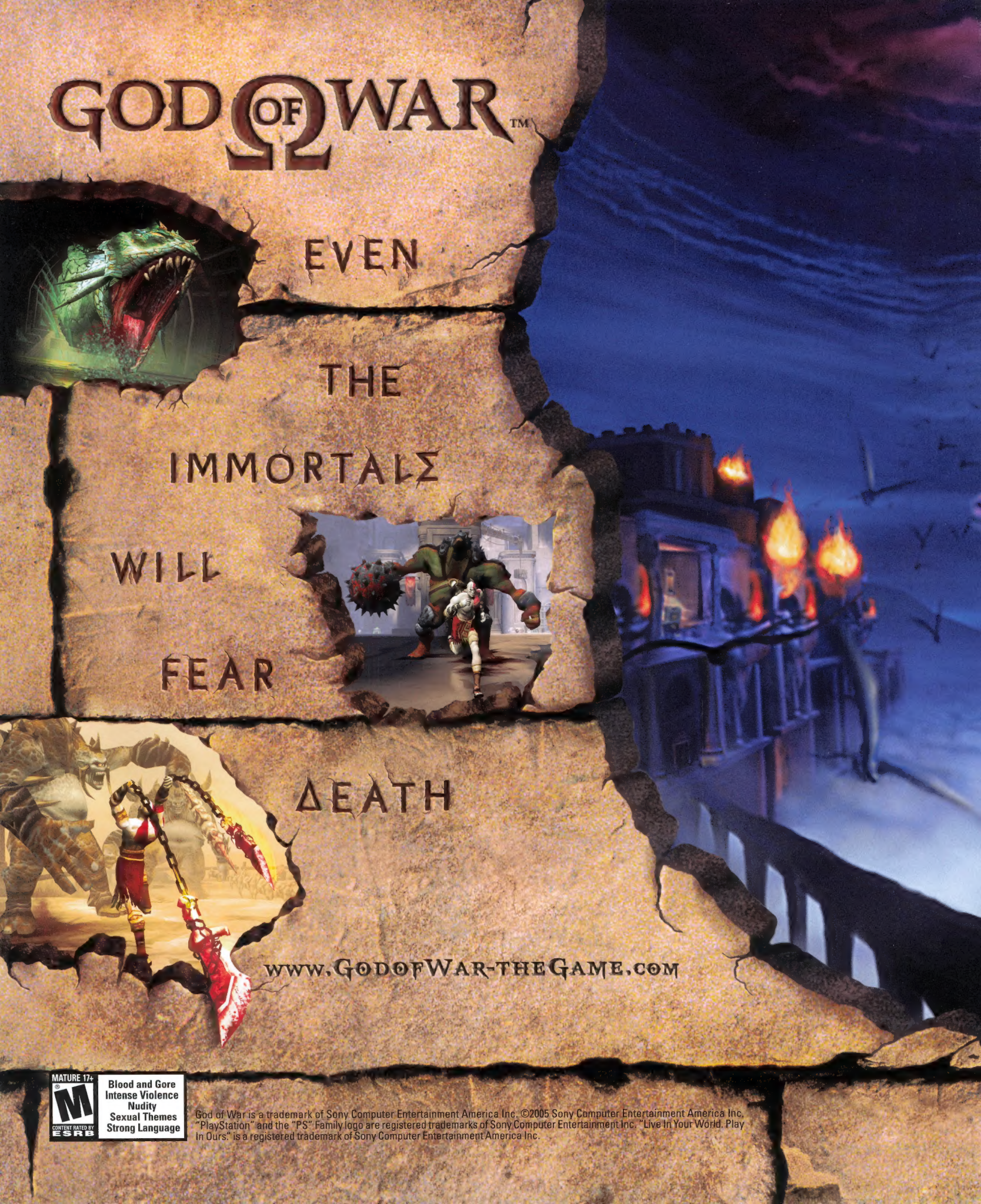

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Letter from the Editor

A Thug's Life

We've seen the next generation...at least the beginnings of it. We're not able to speak about it until May 16 (else suffer endless court dates), but we've seen it, and it's going to be a major milestone in the history of gaming. We're coming to a point where 3D graphics are getting so real you can barely distinguish them from reality, which the more you think about may be somewhat of a double-edged sword.

With the advent of Fear and Respect, 25 to Life, 50 Cent: Bulletproof and 187 Ride or Die, thug games seem to be on the rise—games that proliferate black-on-black crime, drug use, women as objects, the senseless killing of innocent human beings and so forth—all sponsored by your friendly neighborhood rapper. The question on our minds is how these games will be received when they look like real life. Are we more sensitive to this because we're an hour out of LA (where just recently two innocent kids have been tragically gunned down), or does anyone else think perhaps the line is about to be crossed? That is the question. And why does the hip-hop and rap community take the bait in the first place? I wonder if the fact that they make a lot of their money off of violence doesn't factor in. And do rappers and game companies need money so badly that they are willing to feed off of inner-city strife, and proliferate that rap and hip-hop are about all things demoralized and evil? And where do you suppose the NAACP is in all of this? African-Americans have come this far only to see the worst possible stereotypes repackaged by American corporations and sold at retail? I guarantee that if there was a rash of games that showed naked breasts it'd make the evening news; isn't it funny how we're okay with looking at dead, mangled bodies in America but not beautiful naked ones? Or what if someone made "Gary the Gay Basher" or "Hate Crime Harry"? The backlash would be top news.

Ever ponder why society isn't progressing at the same rate as science and technology? Looking at the current trend in video games, which is as much of a reflection of society as anything, it seems clear. There's profit in the propagation of violence and fear, and at the other end of the spectrum, fanatics and extremists who think *Desperate Housewives* should be replaced with *Happy Days* reruns. There's considerably less everything for intelligent discerning Americans these days: *South Park*, Bill Maher, a few movies, some HBO shows and video games pretty much sum it up. It's hard to get a good original game made as long as publishers can put a gun in a guy's hand and say "go kill *the man*." For the longest time, we thought gaming would rise above all this, but now we're beginning to think it's becoming part of the problem, which is unfortunate given the technology we're so fortunate to be on the brink of. We're not anti-violence by any stretch of the imagination. We all love a good gunfight as much as the next guy; we just prefer it in a more fitting setting, i.e. Splinter Cell, Halo 2, etc. Whether or not we can all have fun shooting without recreating the tragedies unfolding in our inner cities is the question. That plus I know first hand how cool hip-hop and rap can be. I look at the anime *Samurai Champloo* and wish we cared about our society half as much as the Japanese. They've made hip-hop and rap edgy and cool where American companies use it as a backdrop for murder, the degradation of women, and ultimately, profit. Anyone remember the first rap game? How cool was Parappa the Rapper, the Hip-Hop Hero? I pray gaming never loses that innocence.

"We all love a good gunfight as much as the next guy; we just prefer it in a more fitting setting, i.e. Splinter Cell, Halo 2, etc."

For now, at least science-fiction, fantasy, tactics and adventure still make up the majority of today's games, and I don't fear that going away any time soon; it's just disturbing every time we see a black man with a gun to another black man's head, sponsored by your friendly neighborhood rap star. A scene in Fear and Respect has Snoop tokin' on a fatty, livin' large in his pimped-out ride on the way to a drive-by. He must be laughing all the way to the bank. Maybe he should stop and think about the message he's sending on the way and how he's helping pollute the ever-diminishing fantastical sanctity of video games. And maybe game publishers should think about offering rappers projects that inspire positive themes motivated by hip-hop and rap instead of the same old black-on-black crime and drug culture. Just a thought: we really want to know what you think, so as usual, don't be shy. The forum is open.

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Wondering what DJ and company let out of the bag? Say hello to Moloch.

Cover Art

Illustrator: Jeff Matsuda

Jeff Matsuda got into animation with *Jackie Chan Adventures* and is now a producer/art director on the *Batman* television show. He has also done illustrations for comic books such as X-men, Wolverine and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Jeff wishes he had more time to play video games.

Painter: Dave McCaig

Dave McCaig has been working in comics as a colorist for 12 years on such titles as X-men, Superman Birthright and Adam Strange. He also works on *The Batman* with Jeff as lead color designer. Dave currently unwinds playing the venerable Age of Empires, and sometimes DOA Ultimate; however, he protests that he needs a faster Xbox Live connection so that he can kick ass more efficiently.

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playback

letters@playmagazine.com

Reggie-lash

First off, why? Why were the readers subjected to this interview of mindless drivel suffered upon us by this obvious corporate failure Reggie? Did he answer any questions? I didn't see anything that would constitute an answer. I read a lot of media slag and hype, he was throwing catchphrases and power words left right and center. Not once did I even slightly feel relieved that Nintendo would pull it out...

He noted with some kind of false hope on his part that Sony would have to figure out some great trick to take the market from Nintendo. Sorry Reggie ol' bud, but just cause Nintendo is the *ONLY* handheld on the market today doesn't mean the market is yours to hold. It just means no one else has come up with anything worth buying yet... PSP is that. And yes, Nintendo should be worried, very worried...

Now I'm not down on Nintendo. I'm down on Reggie and all of his double-talking gibberish. This is the first interview I was pained to read in Play. After reading this, I felt as though I needed to take a shower to wash the filth of this car salesman's pitch off of me and check my pockets to make sure my wallet hadn't been stolen... I really do love Nintendo though, I have a GBA and a Cube, I love them both. But have been extremely angry with Nintendo's awful treatment of its customers as of late, no respect for those of us that keep them in business... How about some online play? How about some more games? How about no more Donkey Konga Crap? How about acting like a serious company, like in the '80s and '90s? What happened to turn the straight up genius I witnessed in the early parts of Nintendo's reign to become mush in the 21st century? Please someone slap these boys. And get us "OUR" Nintendo back... Cause damn it, I miss a good Nintendo game...

James K.

Full circle

Back when the Dreamcast was in its twilight (in the U.S.), the PS2 was blossoming, with Xbox and GameCube fresh out the oven, I believed Nintendo's system to be the most promising new machine.

Alas, as time went on I began to covet the massive variety of games offered on Sony's platform, and so I traded the promised land for immediate gratification. My decision proved ill, however, when the great monolith ceased to read most DVD and game discs, so (with great bitterness), I cast it into the vale of Hinnom.

Not one to quickly admit my mistakes even to myself, I rebelled against my own instinct and purchased the Microsoft star destroyer. Even if it did not offer the diverse assortment I'd grown accustomed to, almost everything it had looked much better. Yet, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, the big box with an X on it seemed more of an appliance than a pure game machine.

> "Now I'm not down on Nintendo. I'm down on Reggie and all of his double-talking gibberish."

Then something called Resident Evil 4 happened and the gamer within me rejoiced. So I swallowed my pride, exchanged a lie for the truth, and satisfied my first instinct by becoming a pleased owner of the Nintendo GameCube.

Now don't get me wrong; my experience has been enriched beyond measure by games like Ico, The Mark of Kri, MGS2&3, Halo, Ninja Gaiden and Fable; but after seeing what all three platforms have to offer, I see Nintendo being the company most dedicated to the gamer.

I remember wishing I still owned a GameCube after reading your favorable review of PN.03, and there were often days I longed to hear the eerie beauty that is Metroid Prime's soundtrack once again. Now that those days are over, I enjoy being a gamer more than ever with RE4, Bloody Roar PF (more fun than DOA?) and FF Crystal Chronicles.

I do not expect anybody to take my opinions seriously, but any serious gamer deserves to experience the joy found in a GameCube. Now for a moment, imagine what the artisans at Oddworld Inhabitants could do with Nintendo?

M.R. Clawson

A very wise man

I'm a new reader of Play magazine. The last couple issues and the Girls of Gaming issues have impressed me. I love the artwork. Are you going to have a section for reader's art?

I'm a huge Tenchu fan and I'm happy to see it receive the attention it deserves. I was reading a different game magazine near the release of Wrath of Heaven and they didn't care it was being released. All I got was a small announcement and screenshot saying the sequel to my favorite series ever was coming out. They even mentioned how unenthusiastic they where about it, they suggested getting pumped about Shinobi. Shinobi's not even a real ninja game!!! And guess what, when I got the game, me and all my friends loved it.

I bought Fatal Shadows and have been at it non-stop and most magazines looked over it, too. I had to read all over again how it's inferior to Splinter Cell and Metal Gear. I've played those games; I'm not interested in them. In my mind they are not even comparable to Tenchu. Tenchu gave me freedom and choices, strategy and action...

Just like your reader who wrote you about your shared appreciation for Street Fighter, I like being represented. Your articles on Tenchu and Sega feel like they addressing exactly the topics I was interested in.

Jon S.

The long and short of it

Thank you, for having the guts to be the first magazine (that I've read, at least) to say that games don't need to be 30-40+ hours just to be enjoyable. For quite some time now, I've been thinking that game length is getting out of hand. Maybe if a game isn't going to have as much replayability it could go a little on the lengthier side, but the games that are built for replays, say Fable or Star Fox: Assault (or any shooter for that matter), for example, shouldn't be too much longer than they currently are.

Who really wants to keep trying to beat their high score, or run through the same level/area over and over to unlock all of the secrets in the game, if that area is going to take you a solid 30-60 minutes each time you play through it? And if you miss that last pick up by just a hair and are forced to replay again to get it, are you really going to do so, or are you going to shut the game off in frustration?

Don't get me wrong, I love the games that have been published in the current generation. They're some of the best the industry has ever seen. But that doesn't mean that they all have to be 30 hours long to be worth playing. Any gamer that reads this and disagrees should ask themselves how many of those wonderfully long games do they own that they haven't had time to finish yet? Personally, I'm still trying to find time to get more than halfway through Metroid Prime 2 Echoes and finally finish up Golden Sun: The Lost Age, and I'm starting to avoid anything that will require more than 20-25 hours to complete (the upcoming Zelda will be the exception, of course). As any married man with a full time job will tell you, it isn't always easy to find time to just sit back and enjoy a good game.

In short, thanks again for pointing out that it's not the size that matters, it's what you do with it that counts. We don't need a bunch of games that have weak stories and are long just to be long, we need great narratives that are totally engrossing, even if they are a bit shorter. Shorter games usually means shorter development times, which means that sequel you'll be salivating over will be released that much quicker.

Thanks for listening,
Shawn P.

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ink

Nintendo reveals their future at GDC

Iwata speaks on Revolution, Zelda, Wi-Fi gaming and more

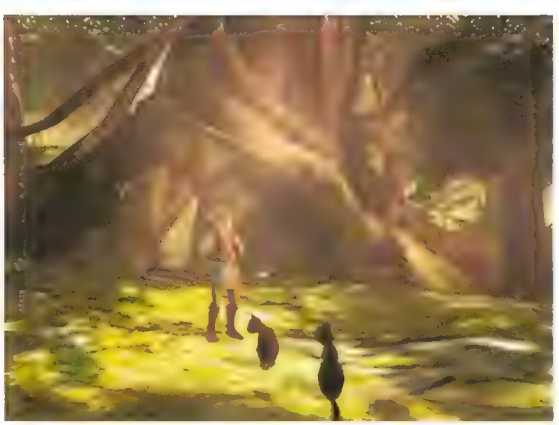
Nintendo unleashed a three-shot salvo at the 2005 Game Developers Conference, held March 7-11 in San Francisco, CA, dropping the latest explosive details on GameCube, DS and the upcoming Revolution system. The first shot came shortly into the keynote speech delivered by Nintendo president Satoru Iwata on March 10 when new footage of the eagerly anticipated Legend of Zelda GC game was shown, again blowing viewers away with its stunning visuals and more mature feel (see more in this issue's preview gallery).

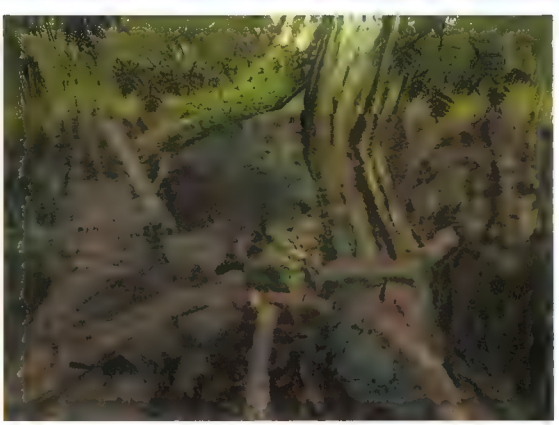
Iwata then moved on to the topic of the DS, formally announcing that Nintendo's wireless Wi-Fi network would go live later this year with a process that would be "simple and seamless" for everyone—meaning that there will be nothing to configure and that the network will be free; users just need to be within a Wi-Fi hotspot. Information later leaked via a snafu at Nintendo indicated that they will be working with GameSpy to bring the network to life. Titles with network play will include Mario Kart, which was demonstrated during the keynote speech and looked traditional but fun, Metroid Prime: Hunters and Animal Crossing. In other DS news, two other DS "non-games" were demonstrated: Nintendogs, essentially the next generation of virtual pet, and Electroplankton, a bizarre music program. Hardcore players may balk, but Nintendo hopes to expand beyond their current audience with titles like these.

The final impact hit with news on the next-generation Revolution console, of which Iwata stated that Nintendo is partnering with IBM to create the main processing chip (called Broadway) and ATI for the graphics chip (dubbed Hollywood). No specs were available, but the reason for the iconic naming of the chips was: because, according to Iwata, the Revolution will be "the new capital of interactive entertainment." And although Revolution's revolutionary new feature was not revealed (a gyroscopic controller or touch-sensitive controller remain possibilities), Nintendo did announce a few concrete details: like DS, the machine will come with built-in Wi-Fi capabilities, and it will be backwards-compatible with GameCube. Further details on the Revolution, as well as the DS and Zelda, will be coming at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo in May.

Lucky attendees were called up to the stage to help demonstrate Mario Kart on DS.

"...the Revolution will be 'the new capital of interactive entertainment."





Left: The water effects look even more impressive in motion.

Gunstar Super Heroes

Treasure answers a decade of prayers

All we know about Gunstar Super Heroes so far is that it is a sequel to, not a remake of, Gunstar Heroes, and that it is being developed by Treasure for the GBA to be released in these United States by Sega…but that's enough!! At least until next month when we bring you an extensive hands-on and our first big Treasure interview in years. For those of you not jumping up and down right now, Gunstar Heroes (Sega Genesis, 1993) pretty much rocked the collective 16-bit world as the most Earth-shatteringly amazing 2D action game of the era. The game eclipsed everything available at the time and made Treasure a household name among enthusiast gamers and the development community. Treasure is somewhat an anomaly in the industry. After breaking away from Konami in the early '90s (where they forged games like Castlevania IV and Super Contra) after growing weary of creating TMNT sequels, they quickly rose to the top with games like Gunstar Heroes, Dynamite Headdy, Guardian Heroes and later Silhouette Mirage, Mischief Makers, Ikaruga and Sin & Punishment—arguably the best 64-bit 3D action game ever created. Treasure swore off sequels (until last year's Advance Guardian Heroes) and have resisted selling out ever since, making them the most talented independent studio in the world. This will cap off the GBA about as well as it can be.

Now we can die happy!

Microsoft touts the HD Era

Online connectivity and self-expression are the buzzwords

Compared to Nintendo's Game Developers Conference keynote speech, things were pretty restrained when chief XNA architect J Allard took the floor for Microsoft's keynote on the morning of March 9. Instead of focusing on specifics of Microsoft's next console, Allard discussed the company's philosophy of "the HD era"—the gimmicky label that Microsoft has slapped onto the youths of today, who will be their focus for the consoles of tomorrow. According to Allard, "the HD generation" demographic demands constant online connectivity and self-expression via customization, elements that will become realized on Microsoft's next console through a Gamercard virtual ID, which will display all of a user's pertinent info and preferences, as well as what gaming achievements the user has accomplished (players will be awarded "badges" that demonstrate their gaming prowess). Further self-expression will be realized through required use of customizable soundtracks in all future games (possibly indicating that the next system will indeed have a hard drive), while Microsoft is also hoping to make the online experience more exciting by having a consistent user interface for all games. Additionally, Microsoft is under the impression that "the HD generation" is eager for an online economy, where they can pay "microtransaction" fees for downloads like new skins, characters or levels. Seeing how this all plays out on the successor to the Xbox will be interesting indeed.

GDC Choice Awards

Developers pick the year's best

Walk of Game

Video game legends immortalized at the Metreon

Far from the well-beaten path of Hollywood's Walk of Fame—where you can extinguish a butt on all walks of celebrity from Pacino to Charro—a squeaky-clean high-tech suspension bridge over an ultramodern entertainment complex (and the PlayStation store!) now houses the gaming equivalent: the Walk of Game, whose initial inductees were honored at a ceremony this past March during the Game Developers Conference. Link, Mario, Sonic, Shigeru Miyamoto, Nolan Bushnell and Halo were all honored, accompanied by game music from piano wunderkind Martin Leung, aka the Blindfolded Pianist (www.theblindfoldedpianist.com), who lays down renditions of game tunes so spot on you can hardly believe he's not finger synching. If you'd like to know more: www.WalkOfGame.com.

Starbreeze enters The Darkness

Comic property coming to next-gen consoles

Ok, first things first: if you have an Xbox and have neglected to experience the gritty, strangely addictive The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay, stop reading, and go pump one of the best first-person adventures on the system. Then you'll better understand the importance of this latest Xbox-exclusive announcement for their sophomore effort. Starbreeze is taking a big-screen franchise for a quality cult comic-book ride, as they gear up for a 2006 release of The Darkness, based on Top Cow's best-selling series of the same name. The Darkness drops you into the role of Jackie Estacado, a Mafia hitman who gets shafted by devious powers he must now learn to harness for the destruction of his foes. The title will employ several gameplay devices as you move through third- and first person views, not unlike Escape from Butcher Bay, and everything will be powered by Starbreeze's proprietary engine on the next wave of consoles. Look for a more in-depth preview and hands-on soon.

Sega forges new partnerships

Acquires The Creative Assembly, joins with Silicon Knights

Following many years of partnership with Activision on the Total War series (including our Best RTS of 2004, Rome: Total War), The Creative Assembly was rather unexpectedly snatched up by Sega in March. Their first title together will be Spartan: Total Warrior, set for a multi-platform release in September. Imagine large-scale Dynasty Warriors-style action in a Roman setting with a heavier emphasis on tactical battlefield flow. Unlike the Total War RTS games, however, historical accuracy is not a priority in Spartan: Total Warrior, and players should expect loads of boss fights with huge mythological beasts.

Sega has also contracted Silicon Knights, talented developer of Eternal Darkness and Metal Gear Solid: Twin Snakes, to develop an original next-gen title. "Silicon Knights has a rich history of developing great games that push hardware technology, so we expect this relationship will result in a powerful, new and highly commercial franchise," commented Sega of America president Simon Jeffery. The key words in that company line, of course, are "new" and "franchise." This could be the big original IP that Silicon Knights has been meticulously planning since parting ways with Nintendo.

April fools?

Somehow, in our last issue (April 2005), the MVP Baseball 2005 review text snuck into the Major League Baseball 2K5 slot. Our apologies to everyone at 2K5 Sports. We'll be sure to run the correct review online. The score of 8.0, however, was correct, and save it to say, for baseball fans, it is well worth the $19.99 price tag. Elsewhere, the review of Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict listed the score as a 6.5 instead of the intended 7.5.

EA oversees overdue overtime

"Challenge everything"...even labor laws!

Could it be a new era for EA? A kinder, gentler EA, filled with compassion and care for its dedicated minions—ready to hand out well-earned overtime wages like magical beans across its entire network of studios? No, not exactly. The state of California can be credited for the sudden—and limited—change of policy, as lawmakers respond to a wave of class-action lawsuits brought against EA. Workers and their families, apparently fed up with months of inadequate compensation for 16-hour workdays, finally convinced the state to do something about it. Under the new mandate, all employees earning up to $100,000 a year will now be eligible for overtime pay. Obviously EA isn't too keen on this new arrangement, and cost-cutting measures have already begun—starting with many options and bonuses getting tossed for employees who are now eligible for overtime pay.

The next step is more dramatic: EA will be routing a significant sum of development to its Florida, Montreal and Vancouver studios. Why pay high-wage workers at Cali-based studios for the overtime they've earned when you can send the jobs to other studios (like Tiburon) and dodge the new state law? That's the mentality here. Florida's overtime salary measures, for example, at about $50,000, are half that of California's. With favorable currency exchange rates and cost of living, the Canadian studios will also see higher profile projects and substantial staff increases. Love 'em or hate 'em, it's shrewd adjustments like this that keep EA at the top of the industry.

Sammy Splits

Darkwatch has a new home

Sammy Studios, Inc. has completed a management buyout from parent company Sammy Corporation of Tokyo, Japan in which a private investment group led by John Rowe, president and chief operating officer of Sammy Studios, has purchased all shares of the company as well as the rights to popular video game properties being developed at the studio, including the upcoming Darkwatch. The acquisition took place in advance of Sammy's integration of video game operations with Sega as the two Japanese companies merge into Sega Sammy Holdings, Inc.

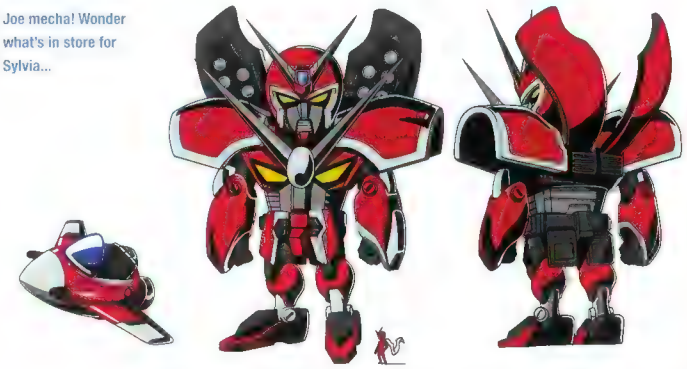
The new privately held game development company, dubbed High Moon Studios, Inc., remains headquartered in a state-of-the-art development studio in Carlsbad, California, where more than 100 developers are working on both current and next-generation console titles. Managed by industry veterans who are dedicated to creating a company focused on introducing original, high-concept, quality video game and entertainment properties, if Darkwatch is any indication, High Moon could become one of the premier U.S. studios creating must-play content.

Viewtiful TV

Joe and co. get the star treatment

Gaming's resident celluloid dimension hoppers are headed to a media outlet near you, as Geneon Entertainment has acquired the North American merchandising, television and home entertainment rights to TV Tokyo's *Viewtiful Joe*. Following his console debut, Joe and company hit big worldwide, spawning a successful television series and licensing program in Japan, which is now headed here, including licensed toys, action figures, clothing, publishing, food and beverages, electronics and the *Viewtiful Joe* action/comedy series on TV and DVD. With a total of 52 25-minute episodes under their belt, there's a plenty of viewtifulness to go around, directed by Takaaki Ishiyama (*Sakura Wars OVA*, *Dominion Tank Police*) and executive produced by the highly acclaimed Hideki "Henry" Goto (*Hellsing*, *Armitage*, *eX Driver*, *Heat Guy J*, *R.O.D the TV* and a zillion others).

Joe mecha! Wonder what's in store for Sylvia...



Rumors & Bits

Ubisoft has officially confirmed that the legendary Lunar RPG franchise is headed to the DS. The original Lunar design team is reuniting to create the game, titled Lunar: Genesis, which will be a prequel to Lunar: Silver Star Story... Sega will be releasing a follow-up to Sonic Mega Collection exclusively on GameCube, featuring Sonic CD, Sonic the Fighters and more... Following the lead of Midway and BioWare, Microsoft has licensed Epic's Unreal Engine 3 for use in next-gen titles developed by its Microsoft Game Studios. The license agreement may also include MGS development partners, such as Hironobu Sakaguchi's studio, Mistwalker... Speaking of Mistwalker, several ex-designers and modelers from the original FFVII, FF Tactics and Legend of Mana teams have joined Sakaguchi's studio... Eidos is likely to be sold soon, and as we go to press is reportedly fielding buyout offers from two different suitors: Elevation Partners and SCi Games... A California court ruled that Sony owes $90.7 million to Immersion Corporation for using their patented rumble technology. The judge initially declared Sony would have to stop sales of the PS2, PS1 and nearly 50 games, but an appeal prevented that from being the case... Good news for Korean gamers: when the PSP launches there on May 2, it will include a Network Utility UMD for dedicated online capabilities out of the box... Following the pattern established with its other handheld systems, Nintendo has released new colored variants of the DS in Japan—pure white and graphite—with turquoise and pink on the way... VU Games has purchased developer Radical Entertainment, including some powerful proprietary engine technology... Aspiring game creators will be able to create their own PSP adventure games soon thanks to From Software's Adventure Player, coming to Japan this June. Users will be able to create the games with a PC program and then upload them to the PSP via memory stick.

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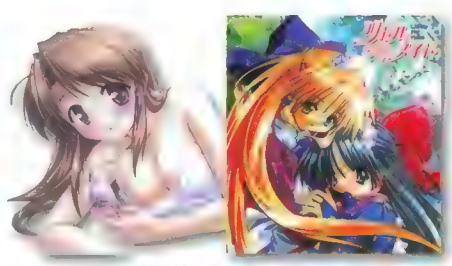

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory** ubisoft / ps2, xb, gc, pc
02	**Doom 3** activision / xb
03	**Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition** rockstar / ps2, xb
04	**The Matrix Online** sega / pc
05	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
06	**Delta Force: Black Hawk Down** vu games / xb
07	**Star Wars: Republic Commando** lucasarts / xb, pc
08	**Jade Empire** microsoft / xb
09	**Fight Night Round 2** ea / ps2, xb, gc
10	**NBA Street V3** ea / ps2, xb, gc

NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Feb. Game Sales

01	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
02	**NBA Street V3** ea / ps2
03	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
04	**MVP Baseball 2005** ea / ps2
05	**Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap** nintendo / gba
06	**NBA Street V3** ea / xb
07	**Mercenaries** lucasarts / ps2
08	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
09	**Champions: Return to Arms** sony online ent. / ps2
10	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2

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Delta Force: Black Hawk Down
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sony / ps2, xb

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Star Wars: Republic Commando
lucasarts / xb, pc

Team warfare at its best. Star Wars like you've never seen it before.

Staff and reader selections

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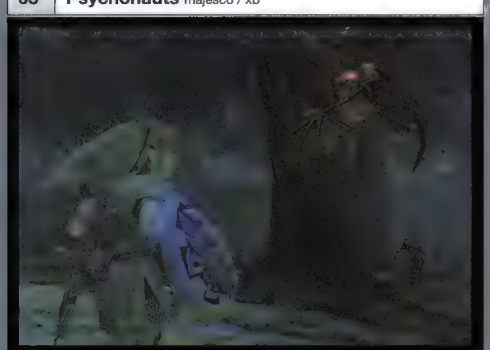
Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Legend of Zelda** nintendo / gc
02	**Doom 3** activision / xb
03	**MediEvil** tba / psp
04	**Final Fantasy XII** square enix / ps2
05	**Psychonauts** majesco / xb



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Conker: Live & Reloaded** microsoft / xb
02	**God of War** sony / ps2
03	**Jade Empire** microsoft / xb
04	**Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory** ubisoft / xb
05	**Psychonauts** majesco / xb

Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Killer 7** capcom / gc
02	**Haunting Ground** capcom / ps2
03	**Lumines** ubisoft / psp
04	**Wipeout Pure** sony / psp
05	**Ridge Racer** namco / psp

Chris Hoffman some editor

01	**Conker: Live & Reloaded** microsoft / xb
02	**Castlevania: Curse of Darkness** konami / ps2
03	**Darkstalkers Chronicle** capcom / psp
04	**Sly 3** sony / ps2
05	**Mega Man Anniversary Collection** capcom / xb

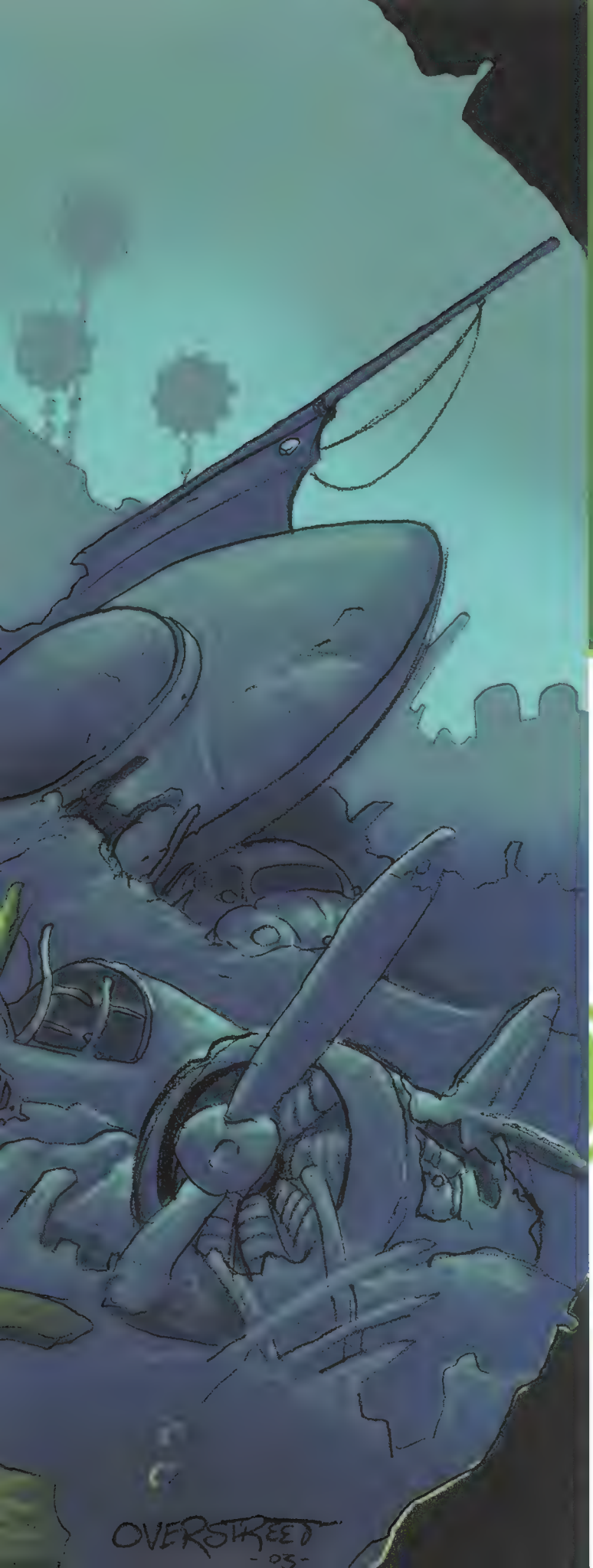
Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
02	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
03	**Wipeout Pure** sony / psp
04	**Lumines** ubisoft / psp
05	**Enthusia Professional Racing** konami / ps2

Ashley Esqueda associate editor/internet director

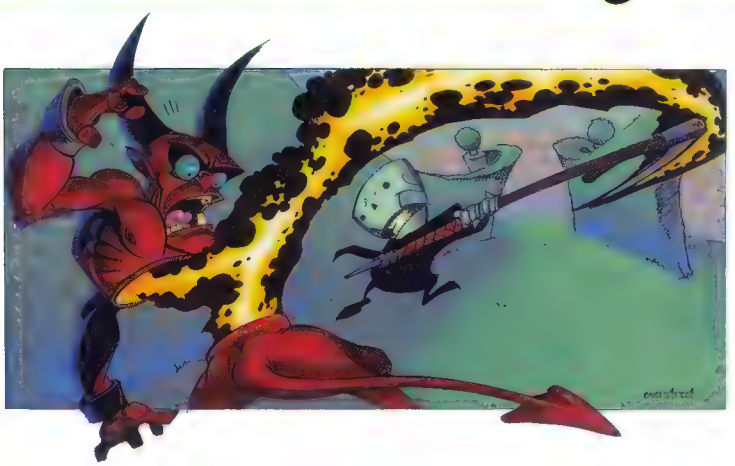
01	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
02	**Lumines** ubisoft / psp
03	**Musashi: Samurai Legend** square enix / ps2
04	**Super Mario 64** nintendo / ds
05	**Star Wars Galaxies** lucasarts / pc

play games



Death Jr.

Kids will be kids, even when they're mutated and dead



The PSP is so much more than simply the next rung in the ladder of portable processing power. It's the evolution of the entire handheld gaming medium, a gateway for original game design and development as well as a marked leap in portable multimedia. This is not a toy, but a powerful, superbly engineered personal entertainment system, phone thankfully not included.

Most significantly, however, is that PSP opens the door long shut for original console-quality 3D gaming to make the leap to handheld, and Death, Jr. is the first step down that road. Essentially a PS2 quality action/shooter/platformer—that likely wouldn't have seen the light of day on console where the approval process has become a bottleneck clogged with red tape—DJ is the first in what will hopefully be a long line of original games born on the PSP, a safe haven where companies can launch brands far easier and cheaper compared to console, to a more concentrated, hungry audience. If a given brand hits on PSP, getting a bid on console is a much easier proposition. Brands fresh on retailers' and gamers' minds are the stuff green flags are made of.

So then, could the PSP save us all from the rigors of me-too gaming? Might sophisticated 2D gaming finally get a shot? Will original characters again thrive throughout the land? Well, hopefully, yes… especially if Death, Jr. is any indication. Talk about a renaissance man…er, kid. So beloved is Death, Jr. and so savvy his benefactors (Backbone understands the art of the deal circa 2005 like few we've come in contact with) that the brand has already spawned a comic book, feature film, merchandise and an honor never before bestowed on an American-conceived video game character: an anime by none other than Madhouse, one of the most renowned and celebrated animation studios in the world. How did DJ attain such lofty status before anyone touched a controller? Well, as enamored as we are with the PSP, that's

"...we find no less than handheld gaming evolved via console-style run 'n' gun shooting with an unexpectedly healthy dose of platforming."

Just another day in the neighborhood.

exactly what we set out to discover, and so with a little help from his new friends at Konami and the fine folks at DJ HQ Backbone Entertainment, our first-ever handheld cover was born.

Having played through pretty much the entire game, I think I get why DJ is so irresistible, even though his dad is in the business of escorting us to that big arcade in the sky. For starters, he's just an irregular kid with irregular friends living in irregular suburbia. There's no high-concept supernatural setup at work here, just urban life in all of its adolescent drudgery. It's just another day in the neighborhood as the game begins, off to school where a field trip delivers the clique to a museum, which is soon to become the central hub. Straying from the group (requisite field trip behavior), DJ's gal pal Pandora becomes fascinated with a strange box (don't worry, it's not hers), which, in a peculiar twist of fate, she can't open. DJ, on the other hand, flips it open without a hitch and unknowingly unleashes a demon siege that consumes the surrounding areas and entombs his friends in fleshy membranes, pasted lifeless against the walls at gateways leading to the game's demon-filled worlds: Asylum, Meat World (all the best games have 'em), Downtown, School and Suburbia. Ducking into each formidable abyss, we find no less than handheld gaming evolved via console-style run 'n' gun shooting with an unexpectedly healthy dose of platforming. These are big, beautiful environments, impeccably lit, nicely detailed and wonderfully cartoon-Goth in their construction, bathed in a palette that's appropriately dark and gloomy while at the same time surprisingly vivid. This is a handheld game? Welcome to portable gaming, act two.

The gameplay is equally impressive. Instantly fun and intuitive, the merging of handheld pick-up-and-play fun with console-deep design, weapons dispersal and enemy AI makes for love at first kill as little DJ begins laying into the game's impressively designed and modeled demon hordes. These abominations don't just stand around and wait to die like you might imagine; some attack from afar, some bull rush and others ambush. All the while, DJ is a joy to control and animates extremely well for a stumpy dead kid with tiny legs. You don't like him at first; you fall in love with him from the outset. He's just too cool—the stuff that iconic video game characters are made of oozing from his tiny black hoody.

The control scheme is also a departure from the handheld norm, as it utilizes multiple buttons, with lock-on targeting and target switching located on the PSP's well-placed shoulder buttons (L also snaps the camera into place and provides "look"), scythe attacks on square, guns on circle with toggle on the D-pad, and X for jumping and hovering. DJ uses his scythe for vaulting, hooking onto ledges, hovering, wire sliding, swinging on poles and hooks, and, of course, hacking profusely at charging enemies when he's not disposing of them with one of his super-juiced firearms—the game's most-utilized device. Between levels, conjoined twins Smith and Weston bestow a bevy of boom sticks on our little undead friend, including a shotgun, freeze gun, electric gun, flamethrower, C4 hamsters (love the squeal), twin pistols and rockets. There are few things cooler than a tiny, hooded SD skeleton donning cannons bigger than his arms, but one of them is definitely being the conduit for pulling the trigger.

Delving into the meat of the levels, almost everything is destructible—exploding in a nice poof of flying polys—bosses are evil and decidedly aggressive, and more often than not, there's ample real estate to freely roam, going off to find weapon widgets and ammo-dropping demons hiding off the beaten path. Within each level, a certain number of demons need to be exterminated before moving on, marked by massive red mounds of eyeball-laden viscera. You'll know it's time when DJ floats into the air and exudes green wisps of light

into the ooze, popping it like a disgusting piñata of fine spray and wet chunks. Both the shooting and platforming aspects of the game are well supported and never grow old. DJ ramps up quickly and never gets tired or repetitive.

And finally, there's the music, which I'm ecstatic to say takes me back to a time when games were defined by their soundtracks. DJ is special in the vein of classic series like Castlevania where the music helps define the action yet also manages to strike a chord inside on its own. Backbone has done an amazing job on their PSP debut, further establishing themselves as the premier handheld gaming developer in the land.

...That's a lot of information about a handheld game, by far the most I've ever written, and with any luck, Death, Jr. is just the beginning in what will be a long line of original PSP games...present company included. They wouldn't tell me what a Death, Jr. sequel might have in store, only that the cutting room floor was suitably deep to make it live up to a namesake that seems to know no boundaries. Time to meet the team... Dave Halverson

Death, Jr.
PSP
Preview

Point of Interest
Death, Jr. came to be during a random search for a tech demo when artist Pete Overstreet handed in a drawing marked "Todd, the son of Death." Thanks, Pete!

Developer: Backbone Entertainment **Publisher:** Konami
Multiplayer: None **Available:** July

Death, Jr. Developer Interviews

Anatomy of a killer brand

Interview

Senior Producer

"Everyone on the team has a really good sense of ownership of DJ, and that translates into people consistently going above and beyond."

play: Since we've already asked you the obvious questions (March 2005 issue) let's delve into more specifics. How big is the DJ team?
Chris Charla: The core team is about 24 people (10 artists, six coders, five designers, three producers). At our maximum we were up to around 30, and right now we're down to about 16 as we're finishing up.

And how long have you been working on DJ?
This is a harder question to answer than you might think! We first showed DJ at GDC 2003 as part of a tech demo. It was really successful in that role, and got us a lot of other work, but because we were self-funding DJ, that other work also slowed down work on DJ; we were down to a skeleton crew for probably eight months of 2003. During that same time, reaction to the IP was so strong that we were able to move along really far on that front with the comic and movie.

Once we made the decision to launch DJ on PSP, and started to work a lot with Sony on the GDC 2004 demo and whatnot, the development pace really picked up, but we didn't have the core team finally in place until probably August 2004. And then there was a bit longer wait for the hardware than we really wanted, so we were a little constrained there too.

Was there a point where you had to regroup and refocus due to all of the overwhelming buzz DJ started receiving? I mean, a film, toys and a Madhouse anime before the game even hits...that's madness! Talk about pressure...
Yeah, there's been a lot of cool opportunities that have come up, and sometimes that can get a little distracting, but really it's more exciting to people. When you line it all up, it's pretty overwhelming, but when it's actually happening, you just look at it as cool opportunities that you want to go for.
I mean, you can't really even plan for being in a meeting in LA with some of the gods of anime trying to explain through a translator what a character (DJ's mom) being like June Cleaver means...

Luckily, we have a really strong team, [so] if someone was off in LA or something, working on some other aspect of the character, everyone else is still able to be focused and cranking on the game, and also able to take the time for doing things, whether it's editing the comic script (done by our art director, Terri Selting) or putting together concept art packages and things. Everyone on the team has a really good sense of ownership of DJ, and that translates into people consistently going above and beyond. I think we all understand just how lucky we are to be working on an original game.

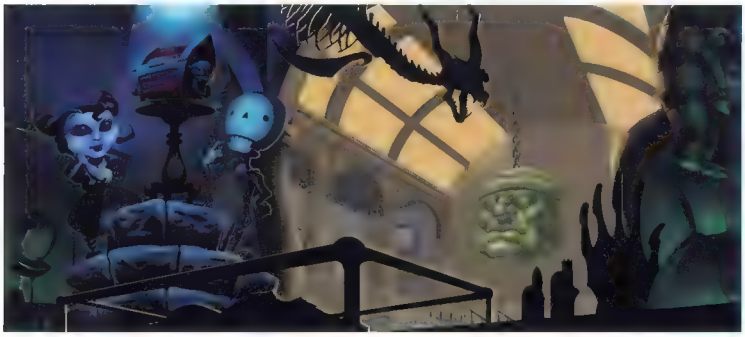
You guys have been together a long time, but this is somewhat new terrain for you, being an original IP on new hardware. What have been some of the hurdles you've had to overcome?
The weird thing is, it's been a long process, and we've been really fortunate in that people have been super receptive to the character and gameplay concept from the start, so all of the hurdles have been kind of surprisingly surmountable.

That isn't to say it hasn't been really, really hard work on the part of everyone on the team at all, but day-to-day we've never been like "we're screwed" or "there's no way this is ever going to happen." Maybe we just believed so much that we didn't pay attention to the obstacles or something. We didn't look at it like hurdles I guess, it was more like "wow, there's this cool opportunity that we need to get ready for"—whether that was working with Gentle Giant on the toys or getting the opportunity to be part of Sony's PSP keynote at GDC in 2004. It's always been the attitude on the team that like "hey, there's this cool thing coming up...we can do it if we just do X, Y and Z," and then we've worked like dogs to get it done.

Probably the most difficult single task was just ramping up on PSP hardware in a pretty short amount of time. Sony's support was great, but on any new hardware there are always going to be things that kind of come out of nowhere. Obviously, with most games today, you want to go with what we call the "Cerny method"—get one level totally perfect, publishable quality, and then proceed from there. Unfortunately, with developing for a new platform, we had to go more old-school—developing all the levels in parallel, and then tweaking and polishing them all simultaneously at the end. So that was a pretty big hurdle. Also, getting the load times down was a big technological accomplishment that took a Herculean amount of effort on the part of the programmers, and most of it was not fun work, so those were probably the darkest days of development.

As senior producer, you're essentially the conduit for the project, which can be tough. What type of process does Backbone use? What's your doctrine?
The main process we use is panic. All panic, all the time! No, that's a joke! Our doctrine is basically "make it fun," and in terms of development, even if things are crazy at the moment, if you think you'll be able to look back on an insane crunch and be like "that was fun," then it's worth doing. It's not worth doing a death march of development unless you really believe in what you're doing, and we've been really lucky in that we all believe in DJ really strongly. In terms of day-to-day process, we use all the standard project management tools, like MS Project, to try and ensure that there is

Anatomy of a killer brand



as little crunch as possible, but the reality of game development is that something always comes up, and there is always some crunch time involved. Usually more than you want!

As you finish up DJ, the thought of a sequel must be imminent. Can you throw us a bone on what some of your ideas are moving the brand forward?
No, sorry! We do have some cool ideas. There's a lot you can do with the whole reaper mythology and reaping souls that lends itself to new gameplay experiences, but we can't get too much into that right now. One of the cool things is that with the comic and everything, we have a ton of good jumping-off points for new story concepts and stuff, so coming up with ideas that could be used in future games has been pretty easy. There are some things we had to leave on the cutting room floor that we want to get in too, of course!

The PSP seems like a great way to launch original IPs. If DJ takes off, which we all know it will, does that make it easier to green-flag a sizeable budget for a console version? Would (are) you guys be developing?
Yeah, as I said, we have a ton of ideas we'd like to explore in the future. I think we're definitely looking to next-gen consoles for any future games.

Did Backbone retain the rights to the character with the publishing deal? Does Konami have first right of refusal on future DJ projects?
We do retain all the rights to the DJ character, although we certainly hope to be working with Konami forever basically…until the sun burns out, anyway.

Indeed. You're with the house that Castlevania, Metal Gear and Contra built, with a first-time American designed character and he's already got more deals under his belt than all of those games combined. How'd that happen?
Konami rules. I mean, if you told me five years ago I would be working with Konami, I would have died. They're really incredible to work with, from the production side to marketing—which is really important—and Konami test has been great too. Everyone there really wants the game to be fun more than anything.

When we first took DJ around to gauge publisher interest, we met with Konami, and they gave us some incredible advice about the game. So we took it, of course, and after we made the decision to go exclusively on PSP, we met with them again and it was just a great fit from the start. Plus we could, theoretically, now get to use the Konami Code. I'm not saying anything else about that though...

Do you feel that handheld games, now that they compare to console games, will become longer, more expensive endeavors or remain designed somewhat differently?
Well, they'll always need to be designed differently, because the handheld experience is more "opportunity gaming," so you have to make shorter play bursts—basically design the game so that it can be played in five- to ten-minute increments, so you can get in, have some fun, and get out if you need to. In terms of team size, working on PSP is basically like doing a current-generation console game. There's really no difference, except you don't have to worry about working on different TVs. Because the PSP is such a nicely designed machine, though, I don't think you'll need to pile on people like you do on some consoles, but games will be more expensive to develop than they were on GBA. It's still significantly less than consoles, especially next-gen consoles, so hopefully that means we'll see a lot more "risky" projects on PSP and DS—projects that push the envelope in some way or another.

"From the beginning, we wanted a bloody and cute game. Something that represented both the shooting genre and the platformer genre."

play: So you're the man at the helm of making DJ big on fun, I take it… You're working with a platformer-like character in more of a shooting-style game. Was there a lot of back-and-forth on whether to make DJ more shooter or platformer?
Mike Mika: Without a doubt. When we started production, we sort of created a list of guiding principles, things we put into place to keep us in check. Things like "players should be able to shoot and platform at the same time." Even so, we had difficulty maintaining a balance. A lot of that had to do with the progress of the game. Since we weren't necessarily porting a game, we had to build things from scratch. As such, some things came into existence before others. In this case, the shooting element was the most refined early on, and the mechanic with the most concerns from the team. When things came on-line later, like more refined platforming, we had already put a lot of work into the shooting side of things and there were a lot of us who were just as happy to not go any further and rely solely on the shooting. But we started to reflect on classic games like Gunstar Heroes or Earthworm Jim, and we'd snap back to our principles.

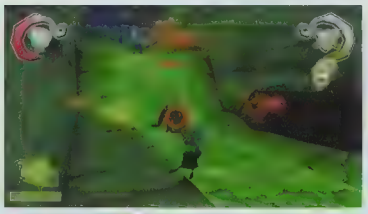
You guys went with a Teen rating. Did you ever consider going Mature? He is Death's kid after all. Did it ever get *South Park* nasty or was DJ planned as playful from the outset?
We didn't aim for any rating per se. We happened to get a teen rating. However, we had a lot of stuff planned for the game that we just had no time to implement, and some of that was absolutely morally reprehensible—to the point that team members were having second thoughts and having issues with the content. From the beginning, we wanted a bloody and cute game. Something that represented both the shooting genre and the platformer genre. We knew there was something to it, and we went through several iterations before it really started to all come together. In the end, I think the path we followed worked out well. It really seems to attract a wide variety of gamers.

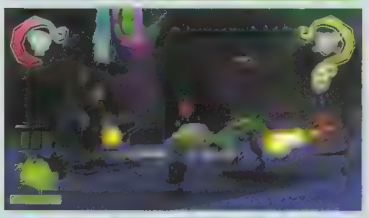
Shooters are a dime a dozen. How do you make a level compelling these days? What are you doing to make DJ stand out?
We really hope that the combination of platform puzzle and intense shooter is as fun as we think it is. Our levels are designed to accommodate a lot of action and hopefully to get a few laughs along the way.

What about difficulty? DJ is bound to be played by mostly 16-and-up gamers. Will they find DJ a formidable challenge?
We hope so. We really tried to restrain ourselves from ramping the difficulty too slowly. There are a lot of basic gameplay mechanics someone should just *know* from the beginning, so we really tried to assume that and get on with the game. We definitely discovered early on that we

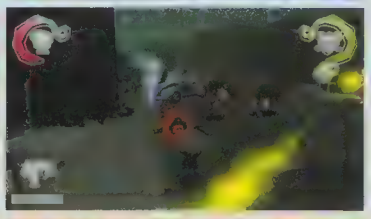
were too easy in places, and we jacked up the difficulty. Also, a lot of other games right now don't rely so much on physical reflexes. What's up with that? We tried really hard to keep DJ a reflex-intense game. One of the most exhilarating elements of a shooter is the ability to weave through projectiles.

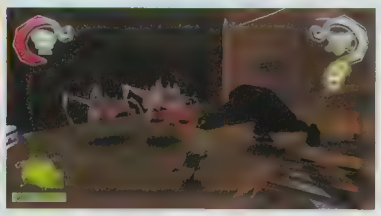
What, if anything, do you do differently design-wise to compensate for the small screen, or is that even an issue anymore with the PSP?
The screen posed some interesting artistic problems. Color choice and color combinations took a while to decide. Some things just look very different on the PSP screen than they do on a PC monitor, and that caused some turmoil with our artists who use PCs to generate the art. Overall, the screen surpassed all of our expectations. The widescreen is the biggest contributor. It allows us to not make too many compromises in the way we approach portable gaming compared to console gaming. Where we would have had to compensate to build up a better situational awareness for the player on a standard ratio screen, the widescreen allows for reaction times to come close to those found on a larger screen. Normally, as on Game Boy, we would have to slow down the camera movement or enemy movement to aid the player.





Very few brands land TV shows, let alone anime series...let alone a Madhouse (*Gungrave*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Trigun*, *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi*) produced anime series. The clip above is from the 12-second reel Madhouse submitted to Backbone to see if they captured the feel... They captured it.





"We've done many hours of painstaking competitive analysis of games with squatty, jumping protagonists."

play: The question on everyone's mind is how the PSP compares to the PS2 and how it is to work with. Based on games like Wipeout Pure and Ridge Racer, it looks superior. Is that the beautiful screen talking or is this better technology?
Isaac Bender: Since the PSP's screen resolution is lower than the PS2's, you can have a lot fewer polys on a PSP screen and still maintain the same perceived quality. For example, the PS2's most commonly used screen resolution is 640x448, compared to the PSP's screen resolution of 480x272. So the PS2 has about 2.2 times more pixels on screen. What that means is that 20,000 polys on a PSP screen gives you the same poly-to-pixel ratio as about 44,000 polys on a PS2 screen, and these are just rough first-gen numbers.

Do you think this machine will be the type where each generation of games looks that much better, or is it such that developers will be maxing it out from the get go? We're seeing some impressive stuff.
I definitely think future generations will be more impressive than the launch titles. With any new platform, there are a few things that hold back the quality of the early games. First, you've only got a limited amount of time between when you first get your dev kits and when the game has to be done. So even if you've got a bunch of great ideas for graphical or gameplay features, you most likely won't have time to implement them all, since you have to implement your core game engine first. Another reason is that it takes time to figure out the technical nuances of the system, to squeeze out the most performance. Developers and Sony Developer Support often share techniques, collaborating to make the quality of games better as they figure things out. Both of these factors apply to PSP.

Does DJ being a squatty little guy make him easier or more difficult to work with? Jumping, for instance, must be tricky animation/physics wise...
Video games have had squatty little jumping guys for a while now. We've done many hours of painstaking competitive analysis of games with squatty, jumping protagonists. Our scythe-based platforming system is pretty unique though. It required our collision, character control and animation programmers to work very closely together. It also helped that the character control programmer was also the lead designer, so if he had any questions about the design goals he could just ask himself.

What would you say is the system's biggest strength? Does it have a weakness?
The PSP's biggest strength is probably that it's very powerful for its size. These games we're seeing would even be impressive as full-fledged console games, and they're on a handheld! It's pretty amazing. The system's biggest weakness is probably the lack of a right analog stick. Hopefully Sony will get that right on their next one.

Anatomy of a killer brand

"The charm of DJ has always been the inherent contradiction of Death's son just being a kid, not realizing he's different from other kids..."

play: So DJ (or Todd, the son of Death, as he was originally deemed) wins the office pool for the tech demo, and it begins. Now all you have to do is cook up a universe... Take us through that process...

Terri Selting: Ah, the way-back machine takes us about two years into the past. Our concept artist had drawn a great concept, Brian Steffel, one of our lead artists, had made a fantastic model, and then it was up to me as animator to breath life into the little dead lad. We did the demo, and got another game that most of the team moved onto, but we still saw the potential in DJ. So for a long time, I was one of the few people on the project, developing the world and the characters. I never thought of it as developing *for* a video game, you know? I love games, but my passion is making characters that live and breathe. I'm an animator and a writer. And I approached Death, Jr. as a writer more than a gamer. During that time, I did short animations for DJ, made little movies to keep interest in the project and show potential publishers, worked up test levels and wrote short stories trying out different takes on personalities for the gang, and different members of the gang, until they started to gel. Basically championed the property. A lot of people brainstormed ideas with me, and I filtered them and mixed them in. I pulled in my friend Ted Naifeh to make a DJ comic. I wrote the stories, and he reworked them into comic format and did amazing art. The self-published comic was such a hit that now there is a three-part series coming from Image Comics. I think the investment in deeply developing the characters and world is already paying off because the IP is robust enough to live in and outside of the game. We went through quite a few talented artists to really solidify the visuals, and with such a young property, it took a while to amass a large visual library, which developed along with the game. Once DJ went into full production, everything happened fast. So again, the early dev time paid off. It's a lot more work than most people think, to coordinate the look and feel of a whole new universe. It's a lot more than just an initial sketch, no matter how appealing that sketch is, to make it happen. One of the key parts of the process is being able to work with the team. It's his or her first time seeing the world that mainly exists in your head, and no matter how clear you try to be, no one can really get to know the world until it is made. That can be frustrating to the most talented artist. Patience and flexibility are super-important.

Did you see DJ as more tongue-in-skeletal-cheek from the beginning or was there talk of going darker?

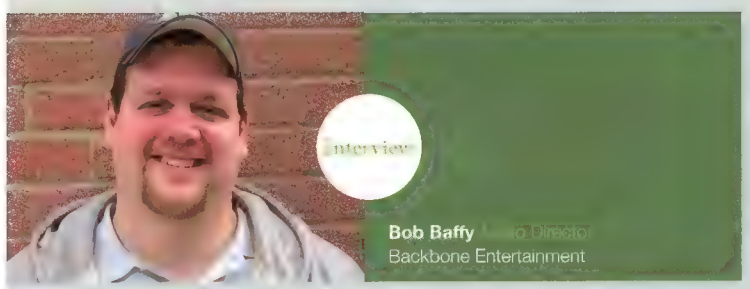
No. I, at least, never thought about going darker. Some people wanted to go bloodier, but not darker. The charm of DJ has always been the inherent contradiction of Death's son just being a kid, not realizing he's different from other kids, but, of course, being very different.

Obviously, there is much to draw on in the annals of Death satire. Are you inspired by anyone or anything in particular?

We try to throw in bits from other mythologies, but wanted to stick with the more classical, mainstream religion take on it. Especially since we're dealing with the Grim Reaper. I also wanted something modern, hopefully something unique. Our demons aren't very biblical, and I was adamant that none of them be dressed in medieval garb or carry swords. I took a lot of inspiration from real creatures, like hyenas or frogs, and tried to imagine what those creatures might look like after a long vacation in Hell. Stylistically, I was aiming for a look that wasn't cartoony, but wasn't "real." Which has been a hard line for our artists to walk, but I think it turned out fantastic. I'm (obviously) a huge fan of Tim Burton, but we also tried to get the feel of Edward Gorey, the richness of Sly Cooper, and I try to incorporate more obscure influences from my own Gothy subculture background.

Will you have a hand in the anime? If so, what? Madhouse is mad skills HQ! You must be extremely proud...

I am very impressed with Madhouse. They sent us a small, animated snippet to see if they "got it." Since the IP is so young, it's important to make sure anyone working with it stays on track. The snippet was maybe 12 seconds long, and the more I watched it, the more impressed I was. The characters, the art style, even the micro-plot showed they had a really good understanding and enthusiasm for DJ and his pals. Most of the work will be done by Madhouse, but we'll help them stay true to the IP. I am totally excited to be working with them.



play: The PSP seems to have amazing audio capabilities for a handheld. Any Achilles' heel or limitations to speak of, or are you completely satisfied?

Bob Baffy: I have to say I've been pleasantly surprised with the audio capabilities of the PSP. This is definitely not your older brother's handheld. I do wish that it had more powerful speakers, but that's the price you pay for portability. Plus, it would look pretty silly if you had 5" speaker cones hanging off the sides, and a subwoofer backpack. Hmm. I think I just came up with an idea for a PSP-modding side business. I'll get back to you on that one.

The DJ soundtrack has been described as "dance-horror." Can you elaborate on the texture of the music?

I'd describe it more as "hip-hip-horror," although it's a mix of several different genres. We decided early on that we wanted to do something a little unique in terms of the soundtrack, and the idea of hip-hop-horror made us all giddy. Let me tell you, it was a lot of fun making stompin' drum loops and putting goofy horror music on top of it. Of course, hip-hop's slower tempos don't translate well in high-action areas of the game, which is where the other genres come in. In general, we tried to keep a tongue-in-cheek horror theme throughout the game.

> "After hearing some of the demonic stuff he came up with, I decided that enacting a strict 'don't ask, don't tell' policy was for the best."

I'm excited with how it turned out.

Outside of the music, DJ wields some truly weird weaponry. How do you go about fashioning a sound effect for C4 hamsters and the like? You didn't actually...no!
Kurt Larson did the sound effects for us in his secret lab somewhere in Northern California. After hearing some of the demonic stuff he came up with, I decided that enacting a strict "don't ask, don't tell" policy was for the best. Whenever Kurt would send us a new batch of sounds, it was exciting to hear what he had cooked up for sounds like "Hamster Throw," "Vomit Ball," or "Dripping Cow Milk Fountain." I will go on record to say that no hamsters were harmed in the making of the game. Someone did manage to run over a Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, but that had nothing to do with the audio department, I think.

We've always felt that music really makes or breaks a game and, more often than not, is overlooked. We get very few legendary soundtracks compared to the 16/32-bit days, and often licensed crud pollutes our gameplay. What is your approach to game soundtracks, your method...what is some of your favorite BGM?
I think the difference between the 16/32-bit days and today is that the older music (especially the 16-bit stuff) had its own character because of the hardware and programming limitations of the time. Composers were forced to be technically creative as well as musically creative, and the limitations actually helped produce some pretty memorable soundtracks. Now that most everything is "CD quality" or better, some of that magic is gone. My approach is usually "less is more." I think the soundtrack should serve the game and the player, and be less of a showcase for the cool equipment that the musician owns. This isn't always easy; I have some cool equipment, let me tell you. I try and create soundtracks that won't cause you to stab forks in your ears after you've heard it for the 20th time in a row. Which is difficult when you have 20 hours of game, with space for only an hour of audio. Kids, please don't stab forks in your ears.
I just got the Katamari Damacy soundtrack, and I'm love-struck. I have a weakness for "weird" game soundtracks—the weirder the better. I love the PaRappa soundtracks, Vib Ribbon, etc. I've also started importing some of the classic collection soundtracks, like the Famicom 20th anniversary stuff, That's Atari, The Best of Sega, etc. I'll always have a spot in my heart for the old-school tunes.

Death, Jr. Toys

What good is a game, movie and anime juggernaut without a toy line? And not just any old toy line: Gentle Giant only crafts the best. Look for the Death, Jr. toy line at finer retailers later this year.

Interview

Producer

play: As producer for the publisher, what's your role in the DJ project?
Kirby Fong: My main role is to help Backbone any way I can. To make sure everybody involved (marketing, PR, sales, Sony, QA, etc.) with this project is on the same page and that everyone gets what they need. I'm also making sure the quality of the game is up to Konami and Backbone standards.

Are you at all surprised by the amount of attention DJ has already received? I mean, he has toys, a film and an anime...and he's American! Castlevania has none of the above and it's a legend.
I'm not surprised at all. Death, Jr. is a great character and story waiting to happen. It's exciting working on the game with Backbone and seeing DJ coming to life.
play

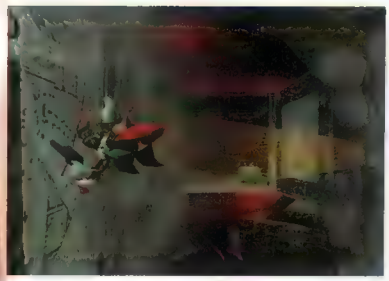
Shadow
the Hedgehog

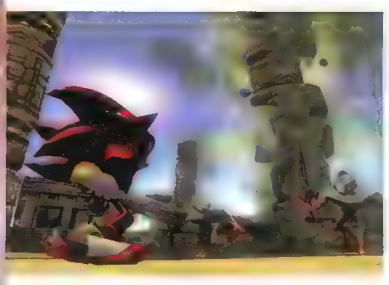
Bang, bang, Sonic warrior

Prior to the game's unveiling, we had been told that the newest installment in the Sonic series was going to be "darker," but we didn't know that it would be in a literal sense—that Sega's famous blue blur would be replaced by his dark-hued antihero counterpart, Shadow the Hedgehog. But such is the case, with the mysterious artificial life form introduced in Sonic Adventure 2 stepping into the spotlight, allowing the creators to mix some unusual new factors into the familiar high-speed gameplay.

At first glance, Shadow the Hedgehog looks a lot like the Sonic Adventure games, with a single character at your command and rollercoaster-like levels, packed with precarious jumps, moving platforms and rails to grind on. But all it takes is one look at the lead character—cocked, locked and ready to unload—to see that things are changing. Weapons will play a major role in the game, with Shadow able to collect and use various types of firearms (we've seen machine guns and pistols so far), vehicles and other objects in addition to his natural abilities, like a typical homing-dash attack, a wall run and the power to bounce from vertical surfaces. He also appears to possess special super attacks, such as a screen-filling explosion that can lay waste to many foes at once.

"While a storyline involving a tangled conflict...paves the way for action, it's Shadow's past that is truly plaguing him."



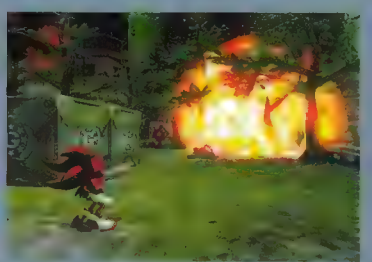


While a storyline involving a tangled conflict between Dr. Robotnik (Eggman), the GUN army and even alien forces paves the way for action, it's Shadow's past that is truly plaguing him. His quest for identity and Shadow's nebulous status as neither quite hero or villain factor into play, as the player—by making decisions at key points in the game, possibly by fulfilling certain requirements—will be able unlock secrets about Shadow's origin and access multiple endings. These decisions also affect the route Shadow will take through the game's plains, ruins, caverns, dusty mountains and other environments (more than 50 missions total). According to Sega, Shadow will be able to "rewrite his history"—perhaps using his time-warping Chaos Control ability—ultimately letting players determine whether Shadow fights for good or evil.

Though we're not sure how compelling the apparently more straightforward gameplay will be when compared to the complex multi-character elements of Sonic Heroes, we're crossing our fingers. Hopefully the addition of these unique Shadow-specific components will help elevate the franchise to places it's never been before. Chris Hoffman

Point of Interest

The game's director is Takashi Iizuka, head of Sega Studios USA, who also directed Sonic Heroes, the Sonic Adventure games and NiGHTS.



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MARCH 2005

XBOX

MATURE 17+
M
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Intense Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation.2

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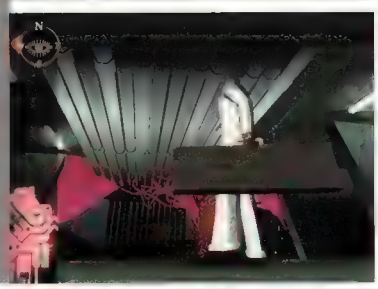
Killer 7



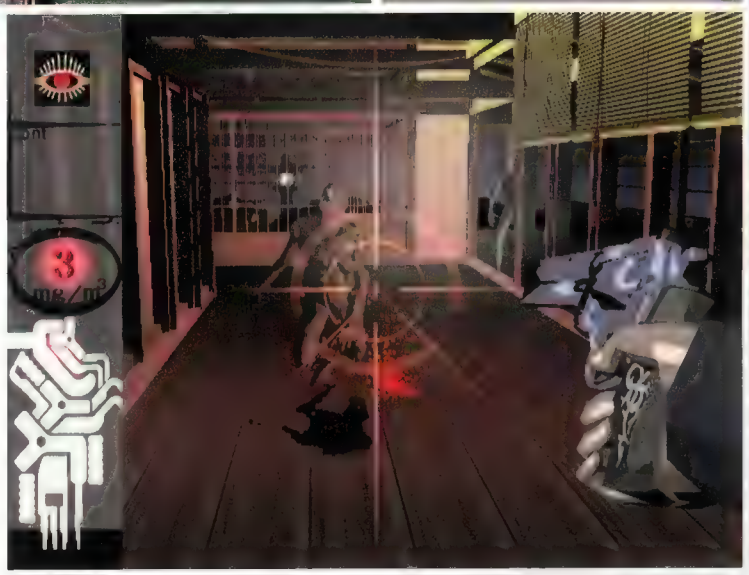
Killer 7 is… bizarre. Killer 7 is… a risk. Killer 7 is… deliriously ambitious. Killer 7 is… confusing and hallucinatory and thrilling and disturbing and totally new. You could play it in annoyance, you could play it with indifference, you could hate it or embrace it as high art. However you accept it, there is no denying Killer 7 is making an effort for something unflinchingly unique in an industry where true invention is feared.

I still don't know what to finally make of the game, so in the spirit of a preview, how about a little sampling of what you'll experience in the first few minutes of play, which is contained in a high-rise building terrorized by a murderous cult known as Heaven Smile. "They're holy warriors. Warriors who fight with a holy will on their side, use death as a weapon," explains Travis, who pops up randomly with clues and looks like a resurrected corpse. They provide the central conflict in the game and are essentially walking bombs, first evidenced as a man tears around the corner, screaming for your help as a Heaven Smile member grabs him and they both explode into a shower of blood. The game is graphic, but in a hyper-stylized, detached way.

Dialogue with characters is spoken in some garbled, synthesized staccato, reflecting the otherwordly strangeness of their presence. Some conversations provide clues for puzzles. And they initially sound like someone trying to explain a nightmare while tripped up on some drug you really don't want to experience. When you meet a man named Yoon-Hyun, he talks in riddles about candles and blood and the mask he holds by his side. If you shoot the mask, he dons it and proceeds to stand in silence, flipping you off.

If you die, leaving remains in a paper bag resting over a chalk outline of your body, you can come back for retrieval as any of your seven personalities, which offer awesome variations in style and killing technique. The blood of your victims can also be taken to a room with a maid and a TV, inside which a shadowy doctor will mix a serum and power up your various attributes. The path you take to get here branches at junctions. All movements are restricted to either pushing A to move forward, or B to go in reverse, each step moving along a defined line.

After a woman begs for your help, collapsing at your feet with her spinal column seemingly torn out of her back, it's off to get a magical ring that will set off a sprinkler that will fill a toilet you will now be able to flush that will loosen another item from the plumbing. The ring in question turns out to be in a dryer, lodged in a severed head that breezily talks about laundry and the cloudy weather. On the way back, make sure you say hello to a carrier pigeon that sits perched on a balcony. It carries a note that reads: "... I get excited when I slit a guy's throat. I know that may be sick, but I do the best work in town." Brady Fiechter



The combat feels a little like RE4.

"...Killer 7 is making an effort for something unflinchingly unique in an industry where true invention is feared."

Killer 7

PlayStation 2, GameCube

Point of Interest

Like RE4 and Viewtiful Joe, the game was designed to be GameCube-exclusive, then jumped to PS2.

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom
Online: None **Available:** May

"THE PERFECT ALONE-IN-THE-DARK NIGHTMARE"
-ROLLING STONE

★★★★★
"FIVE OUT OF FIVE STARS"
-MAXIM

"DOOM 3 LOOKS PIXEL-PERFECT ON THE XBOX"
-GAMEPRO

"ONE OF THE SCARIEST GAMES EVER MADE"
-THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"10 OUT OF 10"
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

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Live and Reloaded

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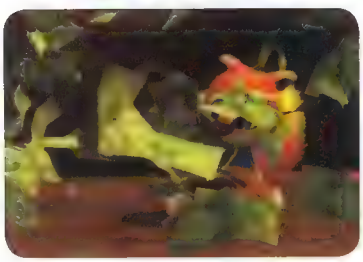

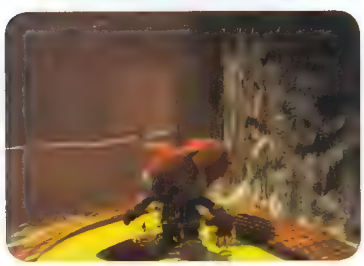

"...an ace platformer of the Rare kind, bathed in the best visuals ever seen on any console, period..."

There are currently two types of gamers in the world: those who know exactly what to expect with Conker: Live and Reloaded and those with no idea of what's about to hit them. I'm not sure who's luckier, but it's a win-win scenario any way you splatter it.

A brilliant Rare platforming epic (or living cartoon, if you will) centered around the exploits of the world's most politically incorrect critter, this years-in-the-making remake/sequel is the very definition of having your cake and eating it too…by yourself, without sharing a single luscious slice. Not only do we get a remixed single-player game patterned after (but slightly different than) the genre-busting Nintendo 64 game, but the epitome of on- and offline multiplayer/team warfare as well. Because they've earned the right to release games when they're good and ready, this is a pair of games 100 percent fully realized and perfected in their own right—one an ace platformer of the Rare kind, bathed in the best visuals ever seen on any console, period, and the other a tactical team warfare player's dream come true.

For the uninitiated, Conker began life as the cutest, sunniest critter game ever seen…so cute, in fact, that after being pegged as such, Chris Stamper and company decided to transform their fluffy squirrel into the most vile creature ever seen in a video game—a title he holds to this day. Conker's a fall-down drunk who likes to piss, puke, lie, beat or splatter his way out of sticky (to put it mildly) situations amidst a game that involves, among other things, projectile vomit, shitting and pissing, an opera-singing mountain of killer poo, oral copulation between cogs, brass balls, LSD-dropping demons, rolling balls of excrement, mass dismemberment, huge breasts and loads of sexual innuendo, a rendition of storming the beach at Normandy like you've never imagined, and probably the best film parodies ever injected into any form of entertainment, from *The Matrix* to *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. And it's fall-down funny. The thing is, it's all contained within a brilliant platformer…brilliant and so gorgeous you'll doubt we even need a next generation.

If you've shied away from platforming epics in the past because of their, shall we say, whimsical nature, Conker is your weekend pass, and if you're a platforming slut like me, this is your wet dream. And then there's the multiplayer/team warfare gameplay…

Being diametrically opposed to afterthought multiplayer, Live and Reloaded sidesteps such indigenous mediocrity as one of the few epics around

All those years tweaking the multiplayer has really paid off. It doesn't get any better. Really, it doesn't.

"Bring me some sweet corn!" One of Bad Fur Day's most memorable scenes gets a crap-tastic next-gen makeover.

that carries with it multiplayer strong as, if not stronger than, the core game. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say this is the best team warfare available to date, especially if you're heavy into action and tactics.

My apologies to the hordes of FPS devotees out there, but capture the flag, no matter how pretty, is still capture the flag, and fragging is an as over-the-hill concept as there is. In Live and Reloaded, whether solo, co-op or versus—online, system link or on your own—the role you adopt (from designations like Sneeker, Demolisher, Long Ranger, Sky Jockey, Thermophile, or Grunt) is how you'll need to play, else watch your Tedi or squirrel meet many a bloody end. Moving over Beach Dead, Fortress Deux, Castle Von Tedistein, A Bridge Too Narrow, Three Towers, T.M.S. Spamono, The Ditch, or my personal favorite, Doon, the action is fast, heavily nuanced, loud and impeccably produced and balanced. Rare brings the same otherworldly prowess to multiplayer team warfare as they do to single-player action, complete with visuals that caress the eyeballs like a wee personal concierge. Not only do their little combat boots conform to every angle of the terrain, but the flash grenades, explosions, death animation and all-out carnage is simply majestic in its über-cartoon-violence glory. There's nothing cute about this. It's as down and dirty as any game has ever been, and at least twice as creative and fun. It's been so long since we've sampled anything new from the world's most renowned action game makers that I'd almost forgotten how grandiose their epics were. Having not one but two all dressed up in the best the Xbox has to offer is a gift I will savor for many, many years to come. Both games play flawlessly and completely engulf the player in a way no other game has, partially because it's actually really and truly funny and partly because, well, nobody does it better. Dave Halverson

Conker: Live and Reloaded

Xbox

Preview

Point of Interest

Conker producer Chris Seavor is a huge *South Park* fan. . .what a surprise.

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Online: 16p team/versus **Available:** June

Soul Calibur III

PlayStation 2

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** TBA 2005

Blades will clash and souls will continue to burn as Namco prepares the next visually stunning chapter in the world's premier weapons-based fighting saga for release later this year. Favorite characters will return to the fray as the battle between Soul Calibur and Soul Edge rages on, joined by three new individuals—Zasalamel, Tira and Setsuka—along with player-created fighters thanks to the game's custom character feature. A bevy of modes will test your skills, but surprisingly, SCIII is coming exclusively on PlayStation 2—an odd choice given how successful part 2 was across all systems. **Chris Hoffman**

Beat Down: Fists of Vengeance

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Available:** Fall

Part Final Fight, part GTA, Beat Down is Capcom's modern take on the beat-'em-up genre, casting you as one of five cartel members turned fugitives who has no choice but to—what else?—beat the holy hell out of anyone who gets in your way, using your fists, feet and, in true old-school style, weapons like bottles or pipes that can be found by busting crates. Besides just fighting, players will be able to recruit allies (some situations involve team warfare), accumulate material wealth, don disguises for when subtlety is called for, and ultimately reach one of the game's multiple endings. **Chris Hoffman**

Madagascar

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Toys for Bob **Publisher:** Activision **Available:** May

Madagascar is pretty much exactly as you'd imagine: a four-player survival action game based on the upcoming DreamWorks CG toon (and a fine-looking one at that) that has you controlling Alex the lion, Marty the zebra, Gloria the hippo and Melman the giraffe, utilizing their species-specific zoo-tastic moves to keep things interesting while traversing levels such as "Manhattan Street Chase," where Gloria, Melman and Alex search for Marty on the mean streets of New York; "Penguin Mutiny," where the penguins overtake a giant cargo vessel; and "Jungle Banquet"...which doesn't sound so good. Do I win the prize for longest sentence now? **Dave Halverson**

Dragon Quest 8

PlayStation 2

Developer: Level-5 **Publisher:** Square Enix **Available:** TBA

Square Enix is being ultra hush-hush about the North American release of Dragon Quest 8 (yes, the Dragon Warrior name is no more), but we know that the game is on the way and that the latest installment is looking leaps and bounds better than its predecessors, finally taking the plunge into full 3D and getting the high production values to go along with the classic gameplay and renowned character designs. Square Enix's goal is to make the DQ brand as big worldwide as it is in Japan, and this game looks like it's well on the way to doing so. **Chris Hoffman**

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SONY
ALLEN
3:55
SEA 0
HOU 0
HOME
SELECT
START

NBA

Don't just raise the roof, tear it off with some serious NBA hoops. Dominate the hardwood in any of 6 different game modes, including Practice, Season and Playoffs. Take it to the rack with some tight mini games, including the official PlayStation Skills Challenge, and go head to head with wireless connectivity. With NBA, you can show them whose house it is even when you're on the road.

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CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

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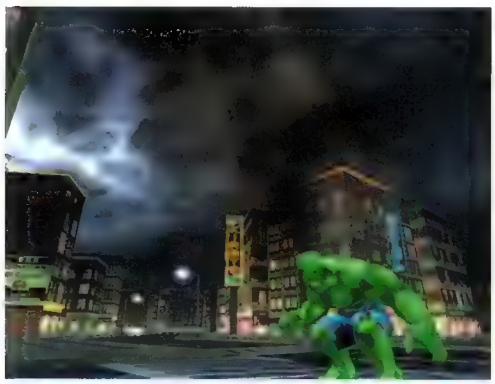
The Incredible Hulk

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Radical Games **Publisher:** VU Games **Available:** Summer

Sorry Bruce, you'll be sitting this one out. If you're one of many a Hulk fan *not* looking forward to creeping around as wormy Bruce Banner again, Radical games is feelin' you. This time out, Hulk can go anywhere and does so as only big green can, with titanic aggression that comes right through the controller. If you can lift it or rip it from the environment, you can use it as a weapon amidst massive free-roaming cities ripe for the leveling. Riding on a storyline written by Paul Jenkins (Hulk, Spider-Man), with original art created by comic artist Bryan Hitch (The Ultimates) this one is the real deal. **Dave Halverson**



Metal Slug 4 & 5

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: SNK Playmore **Publisher:** SNK Playmore **Available:** Summer

As if getting one Metal Slug game isn't enough, SNK is going the extra mile and releasing both Metal Slug 4 and 5 together in one affordable, arcade-perfect package. The run and gun action is exactly what players have come to expect from the series, with loads of humorously animated 2D carnage, barrages of flying bullets, co-op chaos, wicked vehicles and the requisite power-ups and Slug vehicles. New stages, like a battle set atop a moving boat, will provide challenges not previously seen in the series. Neo Geo fans are definitely in for a treat with this one. **Chris Hoffman**

The Legend of Zelda

GameCube

Developer: Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **Available:** Fall

Nintendo hasn't yet provided any new details about their continuously astounding new Zelda game, but the latest gorgeous trailer, featuring images of translucent ghost warriors and giant spiders, was highly evocative of the *Lord of the Rings* films. Scenes featuring Link doing battle from the backs of both an enormous boar and a horse, as well as footage of Link with a cat and with a large, lumbering creature, hint that there may be some sort of "beast master" theme at work. A howling wolf at the end of the footage has led some to speculate that Link himself may be a werewolf. **Chris Hoffman**

187 Ride or Die

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

Developer: Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** Summer

We've had our share of urban-themed racers, but not so much vehicular brawling; so the hip-hop cash cow may have some coin in the reserves...but then we call a cease-fire. In 187 Ride or Die, you'll join a street gang (lovely) complete with the visage of "rising young actors" like Larenz Tate and Noel Gugliemi (okay) as a reluctant urban hero living the thug's life (cash, hos, the works), LA style, who must defend his territory from a rival gang. Among other things, the game is noted as having "pimpin' rides" and a "banging" hip-hop soundtrack. Let me guess... African-Americans killing each other for sport. Wonderful. **Dave Halverson**

Reviews

May 2005

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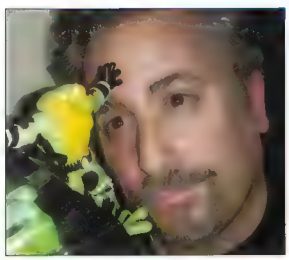


Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: Conker, Jade Empire
Most Wanted Sequel: Definitely a new Battletoads. Oh, please Rare!

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

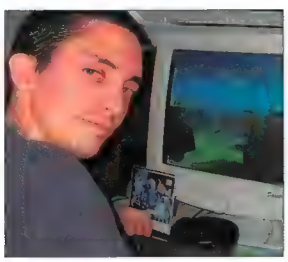
Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Lumines, Haunting Ground
Most Wanted Sequel: ICO 2

Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

Chris has been playing games since the days of the 2600, back when graphics were blocks and plotlines were barely afterthoughts. Maybe that's why he considers gameplay first when reviewing most genres, and why he pays special attention to all things handheld. He also feels that a great story can be equally compelling, thus his love of RPGs.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Spider-Man 2 PSP
Most Wanted Sequel: NiGHTS 2



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: The Matrix Online
Most Wanted Sequel: Half-Life 3

Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

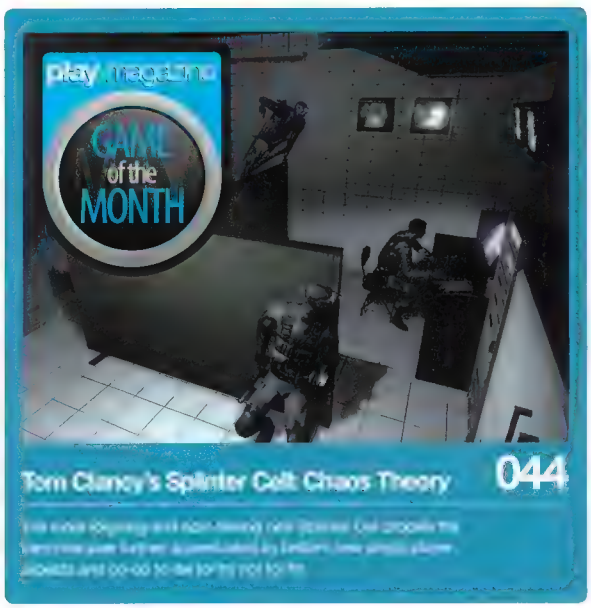
To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Favorite genres: Action, RPG, adventure
Now playing: Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
Most Wanted Sequel: Bring on Kid Icarus!

Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMOs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Enthusia Professional Racing
Most Wanted Sequel: NiGHTS 2



Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

10 Perfect
9 Extraordinary
8 Great
7 Good
6 Decent
5 Average
4 Below average
3 Poor
2 Bad
1 Terrible

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The universe is about to uncover a mythical race. A race believed to exist only in fairy tales and ancient prophecies.

A race rumored to possess unfathomable abilities.

A race destined to be the salvation of all living creatures.

A race known as Humanity.

ADVENT RISING

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Mild Language
Violence

XBOX

XBOX LIVE ONLINE ENABLED

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Stella Deus

The Gate of Eternity

Calling all tactics ogres

Besieged by a plague brought on by Miasma—a strange mist so ruinous it drove the people to madness—the once-utopian society of Solum had become a festering hell on earth until the Aeque religion stepped in with its doctrine of acceptance, sermonizing that if death was eminent, simply embracing it would set the people free. And so they did, discovering peace in apathy as god's cattle waiting for the slaughter…until Lord Dignus showed up and decided to speed up the process. If they were so ready to die, he was more than happy to oblige; the sooner the populace was put out of its misery, the sooner he could carry out his master plan to forge an alchemic army to wipe out the Miasma and rule the region.

The game begins as Dignus' minions arrive in Porta in search of the great alchemist, Viser, friend and ally to the game's resident hero, Spero. Viser and Spero reluctantly agree to serve Lord Dignus (after Spero is humiliated by the ultra-hot Echidna; Dignus has great taste in female minions) as long as Porta is spared the slaughter, and so working in accord with Viser's assignment to rid the land of Miasma by hunting and harnessing spirit energy, Spero and his cohorts set out to do their duty, convinced that spirits are the root cause of the Miasma. Two years later, however—roughly three hours into the game—the tide slowly begins to turn when Spero is faced with the grim possibility that Viser may have sold them out and that the preservation of the spirits they've been ordered to hunt may be their only salvation… As they say, the plot thickens.

Even more so than in Disgaea or La Pucelle, the well-written (and mostly well-acted, with the exception of Spero, who has all the inflection of a block of wood) story in Stella Deus is all up in your business and appropriately deep, since the game requires a major investment. All ye who enter here best be in for the long haul and absolutely in love with this genre, else Stella Deus will eat you alive (as it should be). Otherwise, prepare for the ultimate strategic feast. What sets Stella Deus apart from its predecessors, aside from its unique look—a mix of animated lines over cel shading for the cinemas, with traditional sprite-based characters over polygonal battlefields accentuated by gorgeous art overlays for the battles—is the immensity and complexity of the overall quest. The side quests, for instance, of which there are three varieties from the outset, are not optional. Simply moving from map to map to have at a succession of battles will most certainly result in your demise—and a long, drawn-out demise at that. Flushing out and signing up every possible ally along the way is the only way to succeed, which means scouring every line item on the menu, and then, of course, properly managing each respective character's inventory depending on type and usefulness. Thankfully, they're an instantly loveable bunch of insanely well-drawn shamans, archers, magic users, alchemists, swordsman, healers and the like. Often times, the hardest part of the game is deciding who stays behind as you set up each battle, much like the original Suikoden on PlayStation.

In terms of Deus' management and role-playing aspects, as much as I dislike over-map, menu-driven stores, guilds and management (meaning there are no actual towns or villages to traverse, so you never actually get to control your character), the live-action drama and exceptional battles far outweigh having to tinker over static screens, and the environments (from Gula on, at least) are nicely tiered and more akin to FF Tactics' than, say, the flatter Disgaea. The effects-laden team attacks and overall balance in SD are also finely tuned, and the vocal exchanges, due in part to some truly spectacular hand-drawn art, are, for the most part, captivating. If you get up for long, story-driven, tactics-based gameplay, this world is your oyster. With its crazy depth, gorgeous visuals and magnetic soundtrack, Stella Deus is sending the ever-popular PS2 tactical role-playing genre out in high style. Dave Halverson

"What sets Stella Deus apart from its predecessors, aside from its unique look...is the immensity and complexity of the overall quest."

Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

8.0

Reams of spoken dialogue, deep story, amazing hand-drawn art and 50+ hours of well-honed strategic role-playing

Things get pixilated up close, playfields could be better detailed, no towns or hub to run around in

Developer: Atlus/Pinegrove **Publisher:** Atlus
Online: None **Available:** April

You select your team from a growing ensemble for each conquest.

SONY
HOME

WIPEOUT™ PURE

In the year 2197, racing is a battle of will, skill and extreme velocity. Pilot one of eight anti-gravity race craft down 16 deadly tracks in the fight for first place. Attack up to eight other players wirelessly with state-of-the-art weapons, or go solo as you hurtle at breakneck speed. Wipeout™ Pure is the future of racing in the palm of your hands.

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Fantasy Violence

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AREA 51

A game of cool ideas that never take off

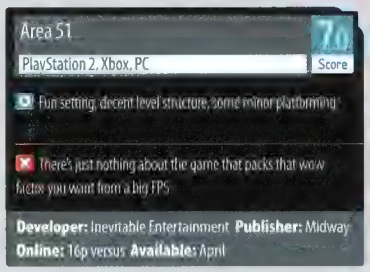
Alien autopsy in reverse. "Sponge...anal probe."

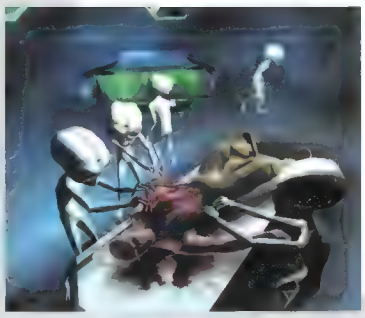
Aliens and government conspiracies and all the intriguing mystery of Area 51—nice little setup for a first-person shooter, no? As Area 51 opens, it would seem that setup has been taken to incendiary ground. After a fun little training session, you're immediately dumped into the action, scurrying through a well-established battleground of chaos that involves tons of allies destroying everything around, laying waste to aliens while you take orders and do some intense killing of your own.

It's a great start to what turns out to be a competant first-person shooter with a wasted theme. After the opening adrenaline subsides, the army you start out with gets left behind, leaving you solo with a rather short trek ahead through the heart of an interesting yet underdeveloped Area 51 setting. The game establishes the occasional neat idea, but it never quite knows what to do with it, and you end up imagining just how much cooler everything could be. The core action is competent, the level design does its job, but beyond the opening stretch, the game slowly loses impact.

Part of the problem is a lack of kinetic presentation. Creatures jump out at the wrong time and become predictable, and certain scenes miss the mark through shaky direction. Area 51 wants to tell a story to explain all the mayhem, establishing the experiment-gone-wrong thread with a string of monologues that become even more of a snooze due to David Duchovny's careless monotone. Here again was a wasted opportunity to take some fascinating liberties with the Area 51 mythos.

One of the high points of the game is becoming a monster yourself, as the character becomes infected midway through the journey and must seek a cure. By leeching off dead bodies or waiting for regeneration, a mutigen store allows you to transform into a beast of a killing machine. Hand-to-hand combat takes the enemy out in one fierce swipe, and you can launch toxins to kill and control anything in range. It adds a little element of strategy too when you're in need of health—a direct hit sucks the lifeblood from the target—or a little extra offensive. But here again, another fun idea inevitably joins what feels like a game thrown together out of genre spare parts. Brady Fiechter


Area 51
7.0
PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Score
Fun setting, decent level structure, some minor platforming
There's just nothing about the game that packs that wow factor you want from a big FPS
Developer: Inevitable Entertainment Publisher: Midway
Online: 16p versus Available: April



ENTHUSIA

Professional Racing

There's room for one more...

I really wanted to write this review without making reference to Gran Turismo 4, but it's just impossible, isn't it? The games are just too close in release and too similar on the surface not to. However, I'm happy to report that Enthusia Professional Racing is no GT clone. Yes, it's about racing real cars with each company's version of realistic physics, but the way Enthusia goes about its business is very different indeed.

In a way, Enthusia reminds me more of an arcade game than Gran Turismo, which is really more akin to an RPG than anything else. Even though Enthusia has a very intricate physics engine, the game that surrounds it is much more streamlined. In a nutshell, you race to earn and keep points, moving up through the rankings and gaining access to more and more cars and tracks. Instead of giving you a big world map to move around in, Enthusia simply shows you the appropriate races for whatever machine you're currently in. The tuning is equally straightforward, with your car receiving periodic upgrades as you earn points. You can still do your own tuning to dampers and this sort of thing, but you don't purchase upgrades as such. The thing I really like here about the points system is the way they are calculated. The points you earn are based upon many factors, including the odds of beating the opponents and your skill during the race (avoiding collisions, staying on track, etc.). This is a elegant way of encouraging good driving and a nice solution to GT's problem of not really penalizing dodgy driving.

As for Enthusia's much-vaunted physics engine, it is indeed quite great. Cars feel a little floatier here than in Gran Turismo 4 and seem more sensitive to pitch and direction change to these hands. My gut tells me this is a little more realistic, as maybe GT4 feels too easy to drive by comparison. The VGS (Visual Gravity System) display provides feedback, and though it doesn't really help that much, I did enjoy watching the weight of my car shift in my peripheral vision.

It probably comes as little surprise that Enthusia can't compete with GT4's graphic detail and sparkling 480p/1080i output. But that is not say Enthusia looks bad by comparison. Indeed, I quite like how it looks. The courses are just ever so slightly more stylized than GT4's, with a tiny hint of the fantastic about them—more Ridge Racer than GT. Again, this slightly arcade-like feeling is reflected in the use of speed lines as you gain pace (though you can turn these off if you find them distracting). And I love that Enthusia has an original soundtrack. It's so nice to have music that is sometimes themed for the level rather some generic licensed pap.

All in all, Enthusia is a very nice alternative to GT4. Though its physics engine provides a proper challenge, the game itself is simpler and easier to pick up and make progress. If you haven't got time for GT4, play this instead. Michael Hobbs

Post-race summaries show just how well you did. Or didn't.

The fun Revolution mode mixes driving with timing skill.

Enthusia Professional Racing

PlayStation 2

Score 8

Very nice physics engine and streamlined gameplay that uses an innovative points system rather than money

Doesn't have the breadth, longevity or graphic detail of Gran Turismo

Developer: KCE Studios **Publisher:** Konami
Online: None **Available:** May

"As for Enthusia's much-vaunted physics engine, it is indeed quite great."

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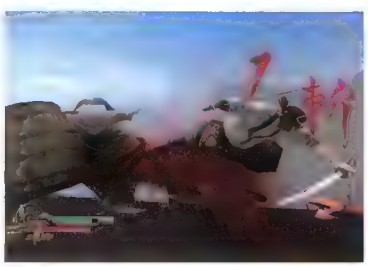
Samurai Western

Lots of blood on the prairie

Video game aren't rocket science. There was a time when they were little more than excuses to rhythmically beat on whatever imaginary opposition was on the menu. So how about keeping with the spirit of that while combining modern-day RPG accoutrements like leveling-up life, magic, defense and power, an evolving array of swords and blades and an ever-burgeoning wardrobe in which our lead samurai, Gojiro, dons anything from an afro wig to a guitar to boost his stats? Ah, now we're getting somewhere. The setting for this Tarantino-ish spaghetti Western is the dusty Old West, and the gameplay a modern day throwback with a few twists.

The basic premise is simple: the bad guys have guns (many of them very large Gatling ones) and Gojiro only his blade(s). However, so mad are his skills and cunning that he can actually deflect bullets, and when that fails, actually spin out of harm's way with his lightning-fast reflexes. And so, like a human pinball, he's dropped into variations on 10 Old West environments where bad hombres materialize as fast as he can send them—squirting crimson like a broken sprinkler head—to that big roundup in the sky. In between, top anime voice talents tell the tale via real-time cinemas, and the whole concoction makes for one super-stylized, decidedly different action game. It feels like a shooter, although it's not, has the all the trimmings of your favorite action-RPG, while it's anything but, and although it constantly repeats itself is nearly impossible to put down.



Blood on the range: Gojiro's an equal-opportunity assasin.

"...the whole concoction makes for one super-stylized, decidedly different action game."

Chalk this up to Gojiro's superb look and animation, the twitch thrills of spin dodging and deflecting in a blur, and a magic gauge that, depending on its level, triggers a number of blood-splashing flurries that build as long as the body count rises.

The models are a tad blocky (although nicely stylized and impeccably designed and dressed), the control erratic when precision is needed aiming jumps and the like, and the collision gets a little messy, but in a game like this, none of those things really count for much. The name of the game here is bad-guy disposal, and Spike gives us plenty of wonderfully realized Old West locations to get the job done. Saloons, mines, estates, ghost towns, ranches, graveyards…all the obligatory haunts are here. Scores don't mean much when it comes to games like Samurai Western, as it's pretty much cut and dry. A 7.5 for a straight actioner in this day and age denotes a thumbs way up; if you like the kind, rustle it up.

Dave Halverson

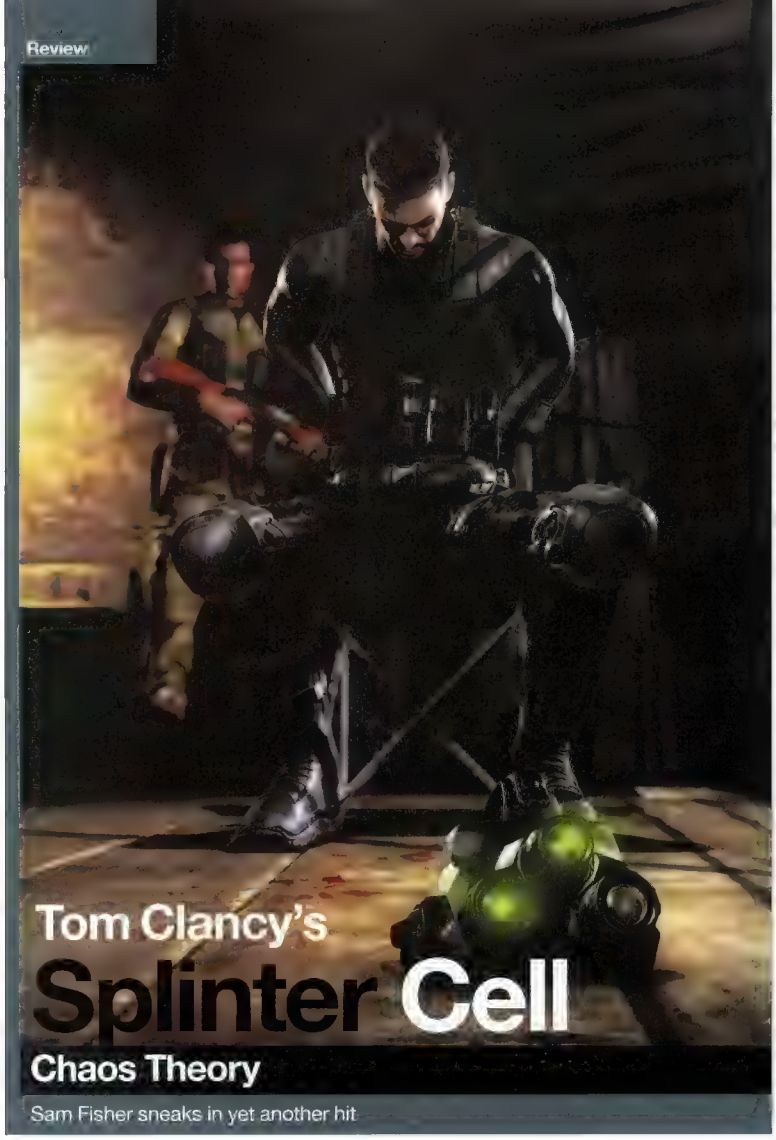
Samurai Western — **7.5** Score

PlayStation 2

Highly stylized fast action, cool soundtrack, lots of character customization. Not your ordinary action game.

Controls can get a little squirrelly, some sticky collision, short on diversity.

Developer: Spike **Publisher:** Atlus
Online: None **Available:** May



Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

Chaos Theory

Sam Fisher sneaks in yet another hit

SOLO MODE

COOP MODE

"Everything here simply works and works well."

SOLO MODE

Using the impeccable shadows to his advantage, Fisher is as lethal as ever.

When W.B. Yeats opined "the center cannot hold," or David Byrne sang, "Things fall apart, it's scientific!" they were fairly well full of it. Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory holds the center, the flanks, and indeed its whole damned position against mediocrity or even a decline in quality. In doing so, Theory ultimately proves more playable and fun than its two predecessors, marking it as the video game equivalent of the two-headed American bald eagle—an exceedingly rare bird indeed.

A computer apocalypse looms and that means prime time for gruff hero Sam Fisher. Fisher must again work the shadows, avoiding detection as he pilots his way through a series of Asian countries and the grand conspiracy put before him. Although the plot is suitably Clancyian and its hero possessed of a grim stoicism so as to be oddly appealing, neither serves as the game's grand draw. Instead, it's Theory's great moments that win the day, and invariably these are created by the game's player in the course of the various challenges. Whether it's a subtle near-miss, a crouched and hidden Fisher being passed up by a guard spooked by a noise, or a dramatic moment of sheer brutality when the hero leaps down on a foe and renders him insensate, the game provides for wonderful drama and catharsis. It encourages experimentation and rewards such appropriately; best of all, the game has largely eliminated its draconian policy of ending a mission if the protagonist is spotted, and a new save system furthers a creative spy's cause as well. In the real world, it's entirely plausible that one little error will bring down the whole house of cards (read: game over), but in this fantastical world where the play is the thing, it's nice to know that mistakes are reversible, and progress can be recorded at any time. In giving players the freedom to blunder without undue and harsh punishment, Ubisoft has created a great incentive for players to take risks and try new things.

A slate of new moves, weapons, and mission types flesh out Theory's single-player experience appropriately, but the real grandeur is to be found in the game's multiplayer modes. In this year's model, cooperative play goes online, and by forcing spies to work together with the aid of communicator headsets, Ubisoft's opened grand avenues for creative thinking. Even a simple distraction ploy, with one character creating a disturbance so his partner can slip into a room to steal something or, better still, get behind his foes so as to drop them like a bad habit, is elevated to high art here.

Everything here simply works and works well. In all things small and epic, from the palpable graininess of the game's predominantly poorly lit environments, to the endlessly thrilling second installment of the spies vs. mercenaries online competitions, Theory does not disappoint. Nor does the game ever coast on the strength of its predecessors' great play. To steal liberally from the salty cartoon sailor Popeye, Theory is what it is. And that, to be brutally honest, is simply brilliant.

Greg Orlando

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory **9.5**

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

+ That great Splinter Cell gameplay, only with more forgiving difficulty. The fantastic multiplayer returns

− It's somewhat familiar ground. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Publisher:** Ubisoft

Online: [illegible] **Available:** March

He who proves his skill to be masterful,
proves himself to be immortal.

Only the hands of a true master hold the fate of the Jade Empire. Perfect your skills with over 20 fighting styles. Battle your way through a mystical world where the boundaries between natural and supernatural are broken. The final test of your skill is passed when your journey becomes legend.

MATURE 17+
Violence
Blood and Gore
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

JadeEmpire.xbox.com

Microsoft game studios

BioWare™

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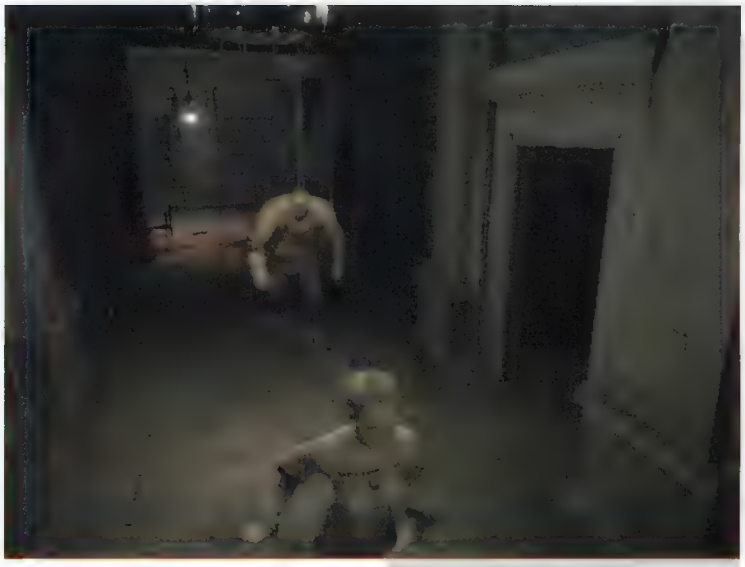
Haunting Ground

An unsettling, different look at the horror genre



Haunting Ground should come labeled with a warning: game contains no guns, no combat, no direct killing, no adherence to mainstream hooks. Capcom dipped into the Resident Evil and Clock Tower assembly line for some foundational parts, but familiar influences aside, the game establishes its own quietly absorbing adventure by introducing a feeble character helpless in the face of the enemy.

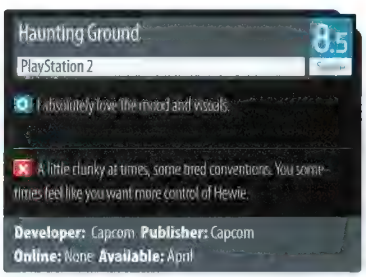
That character is a young girl named Fiona, who has just lost her family in a car accident before being pulled from the wreckage by a stranger and unwittingly taken to his castle home. It is here, trapped in a magnificent setting of arcane devices and strange wonders, where you seek nothing more than escape.

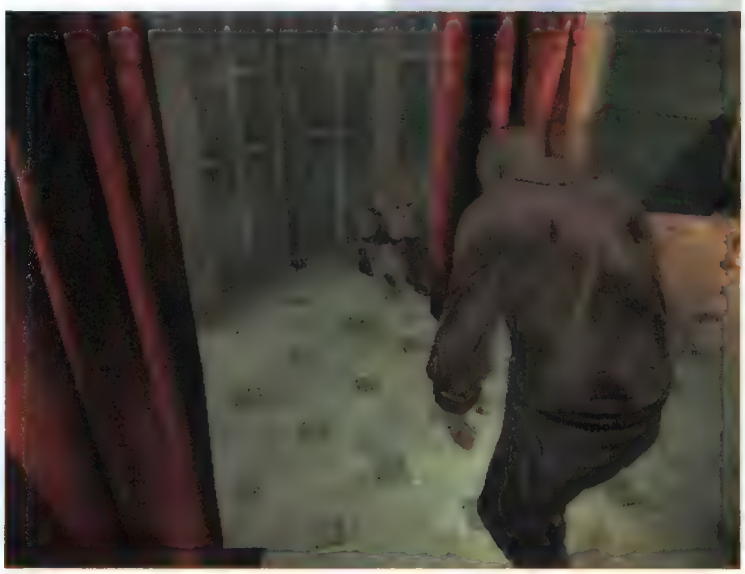
In one of many disturbingly staged scenes early on in the journey, you observe a German shepherd tied to a tree, licking its wounds as it struggles with its cruel shackles. His name is Hewie, and he quickly becomes a friend and a necessary partner for survival. Through a few simple commands, Hewie can be sent off to fetch important items and aid in solving puzzles. But most important, he is the main line of defense between you and the small handful of creepy inhabitants stalking your every step. When the enemy finds you, your only choice is to find a hiding place until the chase culminates into a battle to the death, where the environment becomes your weapon.

Haunting Ground is a game of exploration and mood. While the enemy can emerge at any moment, the vast majority of gameplay exists through solving bizarre riddles and drinking in the grandeur of the enormous castle. There exists that slightly clunky, arbitrary annoyance that tends to seep into the genre, but once you settle into the experience, you become lost to its gripping solitude.

I like that the game doesn't get bogged down in dialogue and a strained attempt to bring too much sense to the surroundings. There's just enough oblique bantering to drive the weird mystery, with an unsettling Frankenstein subtext that's actually quite intriguing; everything's grounded in alchemy, and the visions it inspires are often as unsettling as they are decadent.

Experiencing Haunting Ground, I felt something new and bold as much as traditional and expected from the horror genre. Guiding golems down mazes with boiler plates and feeding ghosts hallucinatory flowers, aligning lunar lamps and witnessing fleshless moaning corpses torturously beating their heads against the walls—every step, no matter the occasional falter, is filled with a spirit of captivation. Brady Fiechter


Haunting Ground
8.5
PlayStation 2
I absolutely love the mood and visuals.
A little clunky at times, some tired conventions. You sometimes feel like you want more control of Hewie.
Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom
Online: None Available: April



> "Experiencing Haunting Ground, I felt something new and bold as much as traditional and expected from the horror genre."

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EVERYONE
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

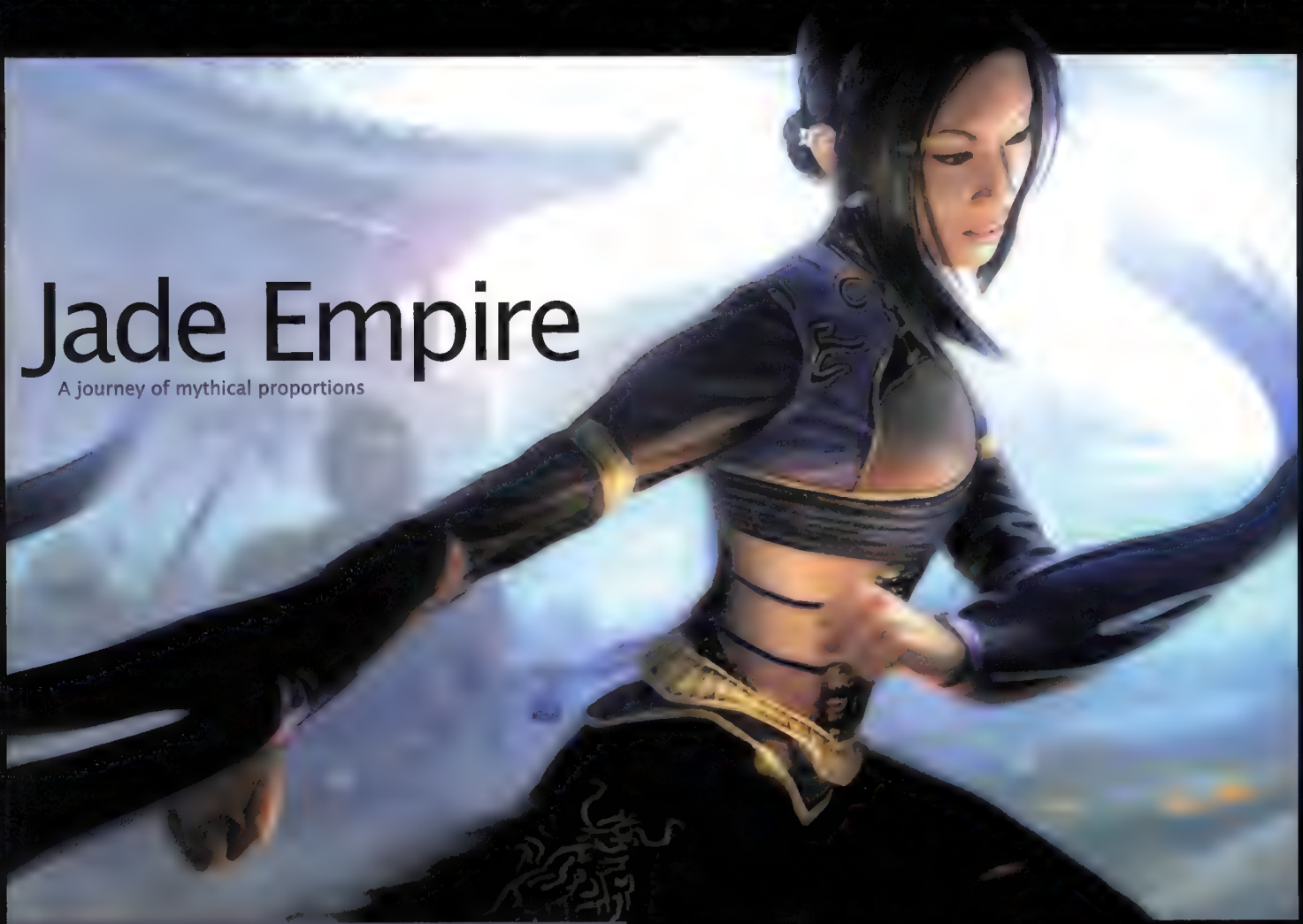
GM
Ferrari
Official Licensed Product

XBOX
it's good to play together

XBOX LIVE

Jade Empire

A journey of mythical proportions



The attention to detail in the environments is humbling. A truly wondrous game.

Decisions, decisions... Provided you accept your first quest, to battle the metal monsters on the road to retail to obtain BioWare's celestial epic (or you could buy it online and save a buck or two), what lies before you is likely the single most story-rich action-RPG ever created. Newcomers should take heed: we're not talking token cinemas here or a few hours of vocal exchanges; we're talking reams of spoken dialogue—dialogue you'll need to comprehend and base decisions on...lots and lots of game-altering decisions. As someone that prefers action and exploration to standing around chatting at length, KOTOR didn't have the same effect on me as it did the *Star Wars* faithful (and many other select Earthlings), however, set within a neo-mystical Chinese framework with a real-time battle engine, this design has finally hit home... Not that it doesn't take its sweet time to deliver you there. I must admit, the first few hours of Jade Empire had me concerned. You begin the game, of course, with a choice, faced with deciding whom you'll spend the next 30-40 hours with out of six diverse character types. For the record, I chose Wu the Lotus Blossom initially, only to change a few minutes in, displeased with her running animation. Thankfully, Radiant Jen Zi lay in wait with her gentle jog and feminine dash, armed with a core fighting style I've come to know and love: Thousand Cuts. No way I'm spending 40 hours staring at the back of a guy, so yay Jen Zi. Support fighting styles come later, but you build your core technique first, so choose wisely.

Speaking to the characters briefly, this is one area I believe BioWare needs to improve: You run a lot in Jade, and sadly, there are no variations for turns, resulting in an unnatural-looking experience. It's the one thing in Jade that really irks me.

"...you won't know what to think or who to trust—only that your destiny is one very tangled web."

especially given how much work has gone into this game. KOTOR was stiff too, but it was *Star Wars* so nobody cared; Jade should flow better, especially given how skillfully modeled and animated these characters are. Five minutes with GunValkyrie's Kelly O'Lenmey will make any game better. Every developer should have a copy on file. They've given us walk, jog and run though, and the animation is gorgeous, so it's not a deal breaker, just a suggestion. If you jog and steer with the right analog, you can simulate a pretty natural look.

Moving on, as I was saying, Jade Empire, especially early on, is a lot of start-and-stop gameplay. There are rarely minutes of uninterrupted action between either deep conversations or loading screens. In fact, loading and conversing outweigh the action early on by some measure; however, as the game progresses, you find yourself completely submerged in the story as a result, making the latter 70 percent of the game an amazing experience, so it's well worth the early tedium. Finding yourself in Jade Empire becomes strangely transfixing, as you choose your path and all of the nuances that go with that choice. The cause and effect in Jade is far greater than in KOTOR, and the story, in my opinion, much more compelling. I've never embraced character management of this magnitude so wholeheartedly, but the way in which it is orchestrated here makes it a joy, building your body, mind and spirit, equipping gems and honing old and new fighting styles. Certain styles burn chi, and others focus. The balance between martial, magic, weapon, transformation and support styles and all of the shades therein make for some seriously cool character development, supported by probably the best real-time RPG battle system out there. Much of your character's demeanor is honed in each chapter's side quests, within missions that take you off the critical path to build character and, more importantly, levels and silver stockpiles. Until you meet up with Zin Bu, the Magic Abacus vendors are few and far between, so having the silver on hand to buy new styles and manage gems is highly recommended. I could go on at length about all of the systems in the game. Save it to say they are quite superb, as is the writing.

Unfortunately, I can't say the same about most of the acting. Compounding the fact that the characters don't express emotion all that well, even though their faces are built beautifully, this Eastern cast speaks in modern-day English...talk about off-putting. Why they didn't find Chinese Americans to voice Jade I do not understand. That said, the story still shines through thanks to the writing, a few good performances and the foreign language of the land that helps ground us in the moment. Regardless, by the time you reach the Imperial City (evade the 16-bit-looking overhead shooting sequences, by the way; they're waaay out of place) you won't know what to think or who to trust—only that your destiny is one very tangled web. It's pretty cool starring in your own cliffhanger, which leads me to yet another great aspect of Jade: followers. Along the path, you will have the opportunity to meet and bring people into your fold, from demon-possessed children to drunken masters and unlikely allies. Set on either support or attack, they figure greatly into the equation, providing insight and assistance in battle. The Suikoden-like camp structure in Jade is great. And speaking of greatness, once the game opens up and you begin trekking through the wilderness and vast strongholds, Jade Empire becomes a very special experience. The demons and deities along the way are magnificent, and the overall sentiment outside of the speech masterful, along with the overall design and balance between action, exploration, puzzles and fighting. One moment you're negotiating with a demon rat, and the next, breaching the gates of heaven, or at least one very peculiar version of it.

With a running tweak, Chinese accents and less loading, Jade Empire would rub up against a 10, but as it is, it's unquestionably a very special game. The team's dedication is evident every step of the way in the vegetation, architecture, lighting, panoramas and boundless assortment of characters. The Jade Empire is even more glorious than I'd imagined, and with so many choices, so many characters, so many paths to choose and three completely different endings, it's also close to bottomless, containing upwards of 200 hours of questing if you so desire. Whichever path you seek, seek this game out, and may the gods go with you. Dave Halverson

Jade Empire

Xbox

9.0 Score

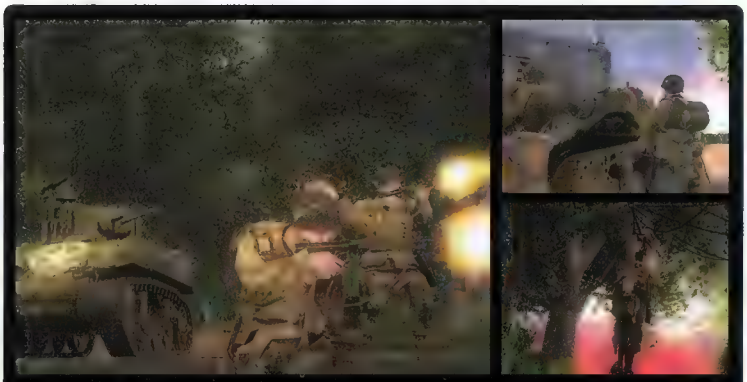
Could be the deepest action/RPG ever in terms of story. Jade is loaded with quests, breathtaking panoramas and tonnes of lore.

Running animation lacks variation. Long load times between areas. No wardrobe changes.

Developer: BioWare **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Online: None **Available:** April

Take a look at these visuals.
Do we need a next generation?

Review Gallery



Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30

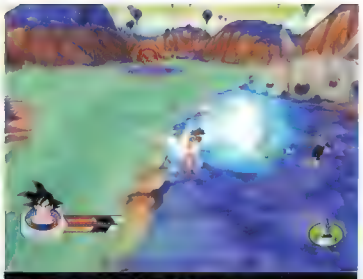
PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Gearbox **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Online:** 4p versus **Available:** March

8.5 Score

Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30 may tow the thematic banality of historical war, but the game reaches for more than straight first-person shooting through explosive battlefields. While you do command a lead soldier through a first-person view, making typical strategic decisions and plowing ahead with your marksmanship skills, the shakeup comes from the coordination of three-man units that smartly fight by your side, working nicely as an engaging team. Production values are also worthy of praise, underpinned by subtle details and references to the time. With more of an emphasis on the intimate perils of war, the game feels fresh enough, but staggers in an attempt to draw us in to the characters. Brady Fiechter

"Production values are also worthy of praise, underpinned by subtle details and references to the time."



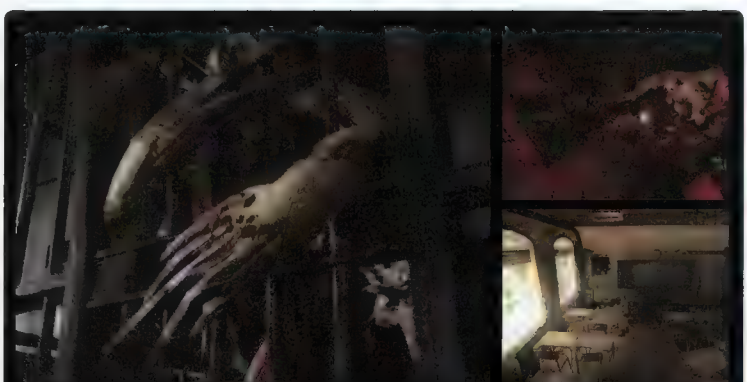
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Avalanche **Publisher:** Atari **Online:** None **Available:** April

4.0 Score

While Sagas has improved since the preview, mainly in the FX department, the overall game remains flat. Cinemas lifted from the series depict scenes that don't even come close to what happens in-game; running up against invisible barriers freezes the animation; shrubs are evidently made of concrete (Goku and company can't run through knee-high shrubs?); and the action, no matter the set-up, barely evolves beyond simple rails shooting-action with shoddy AI and collision. Seven Dragon Balls and still not a single defining game on console; what a shame. I think it's time somebody rethought this license. DBZ fans deserve much better. D. Halverson



ObsCure

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Hydravision **Publisher:** Dreamcatcher **Online:** None **Available:** May

7.5 Score

Welcome to Resident Evil…High School. There's no better fodder for the boneheaded premise of old-school RE (sorry, not a huge fan until 4) than the high school slasher flick, and ObsCure serves it up right, giving us four willing coeds to sacrifice (playing solo or co-op) while investigating the disappearance of the resident jock, linked to the principal's bio-vegetation-mutation experiment gone horribly awry. Although a few hours in, meds and ammo become a tad too scarce for my blood, everything here (save maybe the real time cinemas) is done exceedingly well—lighting, graphics, animation, music and perfunctory story are all on the money—as is the campus in all of its Sunnydale High splendor, along with those wonderful RE-style puzzles. Dave Halverson

"There's no better fodder for the bone-headed premise of old-school RE... than the high school slasher flick..."

Dead to Rights II

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Widescreen Games **Publisher:** Namco **Online:** None **Available:** April

4.5 Score

You have the right to remain disinterested. Dead to Rights II takes the action-shooter genre and shoves it straight through the Blanderizer 6235 to ensure any sense of novelty possibly contained therein meets its brutal end. Namco got a few things right here in eliminating the first game's tedious weightlifting and safecracking minigames, providing a greater role for hero Jack Slate's dog Shadow, and crafting humorous cutscenes, yet it doesn't compensate for the uninspired blasting sequences that are inexplicably broken up by uninspired and drawn-out brawling where Slate and his enemies forget they're carrying guns. G. Orlando

UNLEASH YOUR INNER DEMON

"With top-notch visuals, a promising score, a unique storyline and complex play system, Digital Devil Saga: Avatar Tuner is definitely the RPG to sink your teeth into..."
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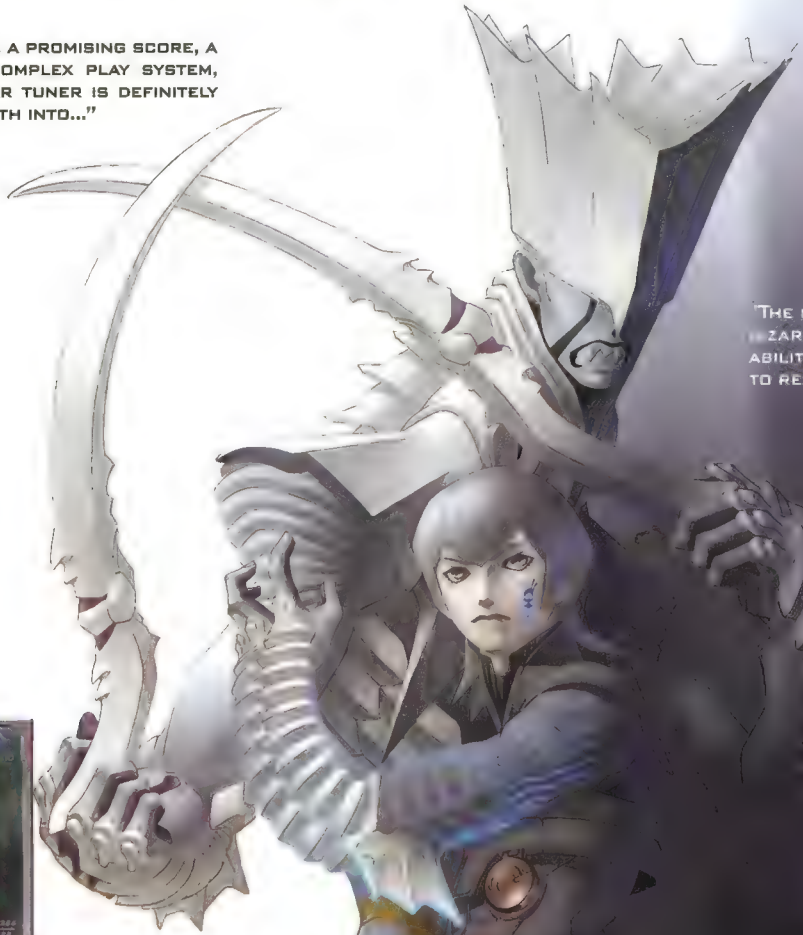
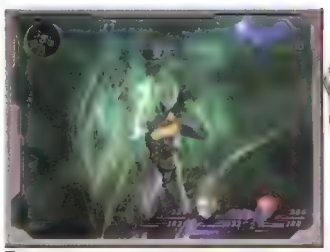
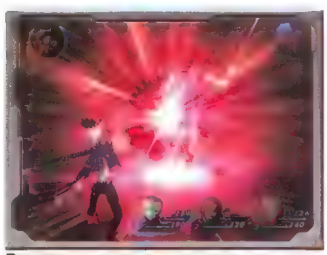


NEWTYPE USA GAME OF THE MONTH

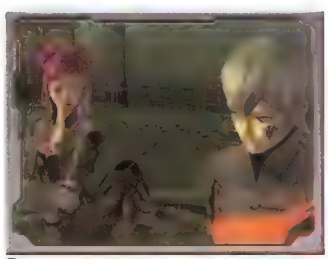
"The combination of slick graphics, bizarre story, and transforming abilities should make this an RPG to remember." — PSM



Transform into a demon to devour your enemies and gain powerful abilities!



Breathtaking cel-shaded graphics and special effects bring the world of the Junkyard to life!



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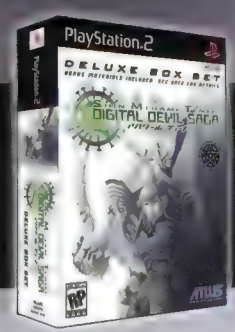

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MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
Sexual Themes
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation.2

RPG

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Lego Star Wars: The Video Game

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Traveller's Tales **Publisher:** Eidos **Online:** None **Available:** March

6.0 Score

I still think that this game is the result of some sort of corporate licensing meeting gone horribly out of control, but Lego Star Wars does have a few good things going for it, specifically the wide range of playable characters taken from episodes I to III of the *Star Wars* franchise, many with unique abilities, the neat environmental interaction/destruction achieved using force powers, and the puzzles that incorporate both of these elements to full effect. The shootin' and saber-swingin' action is nothing to write home about, however, nor are the "blocky" graphics, and the two-player mode sometimes proves problematic. This game is also one of the easiest the galaxy has ever seen. Still, becoming Darth Maul and repeatedly killing Jar Jar has merit. Chris Hoffman

"Lego Star Wars does have a few good things going for it, specifically the wide range of playable characters..."

Donkey Kong Jungle Beat

GameCube

Developer: Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **Online:** None **Available:** March

8.5 Score

Even more amazing than the fact that I played a game using bongos is that I actually liked it...a lot. I suppose one of Nintendo's contraptions was bound to work on me sooner or later... Not to say that I don't wish JB was designed as a traditional DKC platformer, but hey, if I have to bang drums to enjoy 2D this amazing, then so be it. I'm amazed by the precision in which the bongos actually work; it's a thoroughly quality apparatus. At times it's like having two massive buttons in your lap as the chase sequences and especially King battles are masterfully brought off using claps to dodge and left/right beats to pummel, and it's one of the prettiest and exciting-to-watch games I've ever seen. Gotta love first-party Nintendo. Dave Halverson

Mega Man Anniversary Collection

Xbox

Dev: Capcom/Atomic Planet **Pub:** Capcom **Online:** None **Available:** March

7.5 Score

They say that good things come to those who wait, but that's only partially true of Mega Man Anniversary Collection, which follows its GC and PS2 counterparts by several months. This version does sport the best selection of bonus material and options, but it still offers questionable implementation of other new features (the new HUD, Navi Mode and half-heartedly remixed music are still linked as a single option) and still has the occasional crash bug. But when you're speaking purely of the gameplay involved and ignore the shell, what you're faced with is a collection of 10 games—the majority of which are nothing short of great—that stand as timeless classics. Mega Man's fantastic platforming and weapon-swiping action are still infinitely playable. Chris Hoffman

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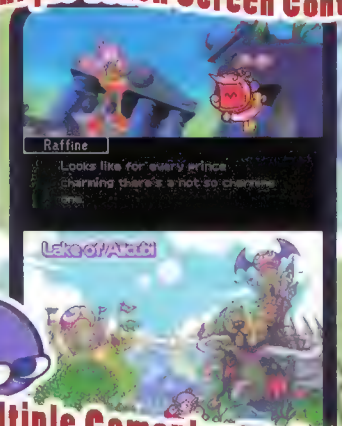

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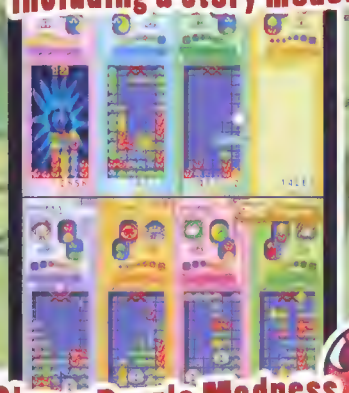

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Rave Master

GameCube

Developer: KCE Japan **Publisher:** Konami **Online:** None **Available:** March

5.5 Score

If Konami knows one thing, it's how to represent a core demographic, which is why their name is on mega kids' fare like *Yu-Gi-Oh* and *Shaman King*. I'm not so sure, however, whether or not this will hold true with Rave Master, for which they've constructed a character-driven fighter revolving around each series' mainstay within a Powerstone-like pick-up/power-up framework. Elie, for instance, is secretly photographed naked while bathing in the hot springs, so her plight has her challenging everyone she sees until she finds the culprit; cute, and a little jiggly, but not so compelling. On the plus side, RM is instantly gratifying for fans with its easy to pick-up and ramp-up gameplay, and I like the anime overlays, but it's also hella simplistic and the 3D models less than spectacular. DH

Cold Fear

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Darkworks **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Online:** None **Available:** March

7.0 Score

Give it up for the neat setting: a Russian rig is stalled somewhere in the stormy seas, and you're out to investigate mutated sailors and other oddities. The movement of the boat, tossed around by the violent waves, could have become a unique platform for exploration, but alas, the game sticks with the obvious. Everything comes down to a fairly stock affair. You've got your various weapons, basic puzzles, ugly enemies and low-lit corridors, chugging alongside a story that never goes anywhere past a decent setup. I love this type of game, and what is here is handled well enough to hold a genre fan's interest, but a leaden feel of backtracking and other nags here and there tie the game down from anything memorable. Brady Fiechter

"...what is here is handled well enough to hold a genre fan's interest."

TMNT: Mutant Melee

GameCube, Xbox, PC

Developer: KCE Studios **Publisher:** Konami **Online:** None **Available:** March

3.5 Score

As a four-player co-op action/platform game, the last TMNT title had, in my opinion, a few unique redeeming qualities. I'm afraid I can't say the same thing about TMNT: Mutant Melee. By taking the troubled engine of the previous game and jamming it into an arena-fighting mold, KCE Studios has managed to create a mash-happy brawler that really isn't suited for versus combat. Between cheap enemy AI, limited options, simple combos and easy-to-execute but poorly conceived special moves that belie a lack of depth, it's hard to find the fun in Mutant Melee, whether playing alone or with friends. There are, at least, a wealth of playable TMNT characters and some interesting interactive battlegrounds, but even the faithful should be wary. Chris Hoffman

"...it's hard to find the fun in Mutant Melee, whether playing alone or with friends."

Narc

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Point of View **Publisher:** Midway **Online:** None **Available:** March

6.0 Score

While the original 1988 Narc was revolutionary in many ways, this modern update primarily tries to conform to the overdone GTA style—only with drugs as power-ups. I'll leave it to the player to decide whether the glamorization of drugs is an appropriate game hook (hey kids, did you know crack improves your aim?), but I can certainly say that the core gameplay is decent but nothing special. The graphics and animation are definitely budget and the script is pretty bad at times, but there's balance through quality voice acting, mission variety and a fair depth of lethal and non-lethal combat techniques. A few annoying control and camera issues become readily apparent in some of the more frustrating missions. Chris Hoffman

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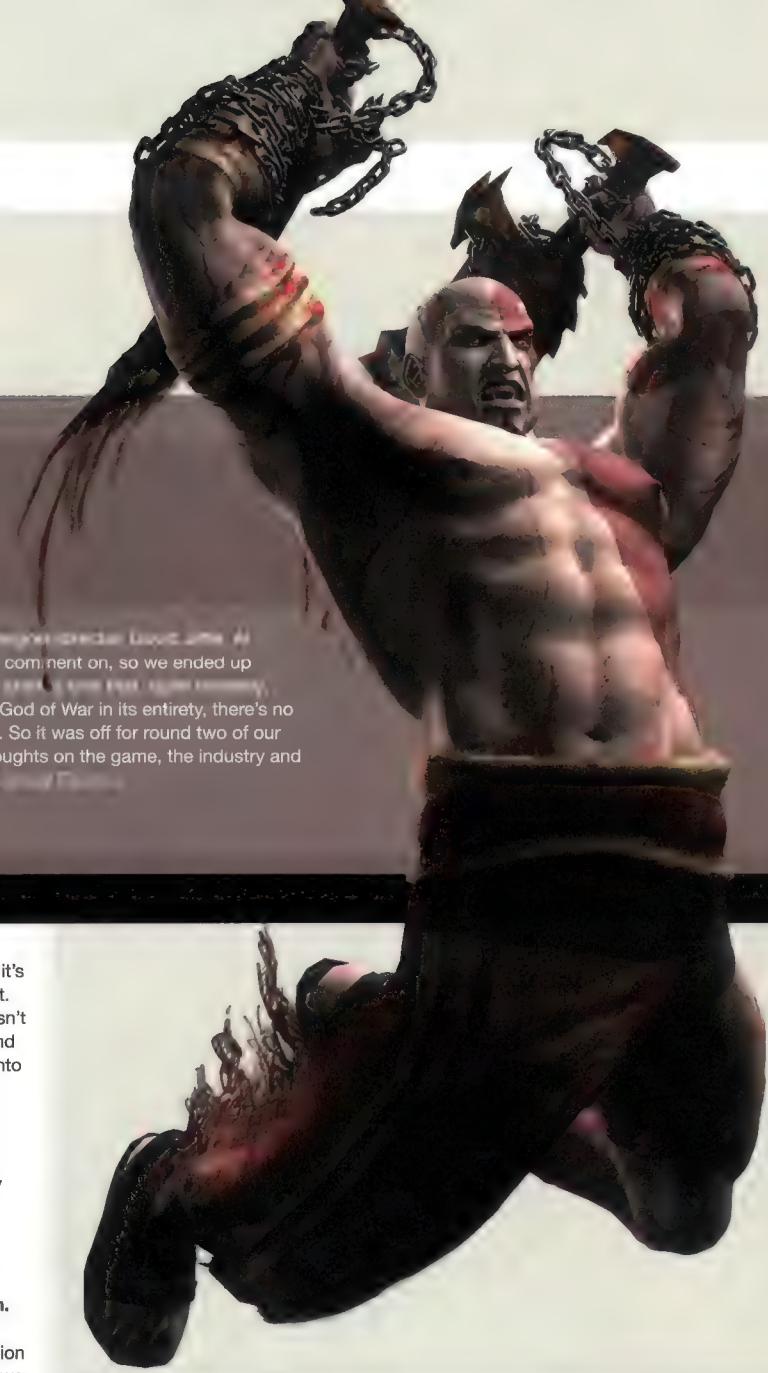


Postmortem

God of War

A week before the release of God of War, I spoke at length to the game's lead designer/director David Jaffe. At the time, I had played the short one-level demo and really didn't have much to comment on, so we ended up [illegible] doesn't come through that much from enough developers. Now that I've experienced God of War in its entirety, there's no doubt that this passion was fully funneled into the game, resulting in a modern classic. So it was off for round two of our interview, where I visited the outspoken Jaffe in his Santa Monica offices to get his thoughts on the game, the industry and the design process. The following is an edited excerpt of our [illegible]

System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Sony Santa Monica **Publisher:** Sony

Interview: David Jaffe Lead Designer/ Game Director **God of War**

play: I felt such a passion coming from God of War.
David Jaffe: All the games I've worked on, whether good or bad or average, I think it's fair to say that everything I've worked on has had a soul; they've had a passion behind them. And that's not just me, that's the guys I've always worked with. Part of my job is to make sure that passion comes through. And that's why I've always liked, say, Lorne Lanning's games. The guys who made ICO, you feel so much behind that game. We have very few people who bring a soulful approach. Gamemakers seem to be more craftsman. There's like five or six guys who I think really get it in this industry. I aspire to that.

It's a tough market out there right now. You've made a great game in God of War, but you see it as not only a tough game to make, but lying on that edge of risk maybe not enough games settle on today.
I don't know man, it is a tough thing out there. You look at Twisted Metal [on which Jaffe served as lead designer]; it was right for its time. It had that sort of reality you could relate to, but it had that bit of fantasy. Now, I don't think Twisted Metal would have been anywhere near as relevant now as it was when it first came out. If you look at what's selling, it's GT4, it's SOCOM, it's GTA—it's stuff people can pick up and relate to.

So relating to a game is the key?
My point has to do with the basic thematic. There needs to be something you can relate to. If you look at Pixar, they make movies people can relate to. Look at *Cars*. Everyone has cars, everyone loves cars, it's the American way, and we can relate to it. Same with toys and *Toy Story*. *Bug's* wasn't as strong, but look at the superheroes and all that. My point is that when you walk into a game store today, you really need the concept to sell itself.

Obviously this is a big business, and you have to be calculated. I absolutely respect that and understand that. But a problem I see with games is that, even when you have that foundation of a strong idea, you oftentimes don't have anything for that idea to stand on. There's not enough artistry behind it.
We don't have enough of the creative vision driving these products. We have some—we pointed out a couple of guys—the Lorne Lannings of the world, and clearly, when Miyamoto chooses to direct a game and not just oversee. I hate that he's doing that. I wish he would just direct a game like a Zelda. We need to get more of these kinds of people. Otherwise, you have all these people… They mean well, they want to be creative, they are creative in their own right, but you really need somebody driving the boat that comes to it with a sense of artistry and passion and they have something to say. They have some sort of internal need to make the product. I just don't see a lot of that. I think a lot of it is because of how this business was formed. It started with technical people, and technical people are incredibly creative in their own way, in the way they write their code. The way they sort of create a landscape in 3D. But in terms of communicating and connecting on an emotional level, which is what any type of art form demands you to do in order to be successful and fulfilling, I don't think we've done a good job of bringing those people in. Not just from a standpoint of recruiting, but from a standpoint…

> "...whether you play it like ICO or, say, Final Fantasy, and you cry, that was never the goal. But I think there's a soul to it..."
>
> David Jaffe, design director, God of War

You have to find someone with an intimate grasp of both mediums. I think that's something that you seemed to achieve with God of War. In fact, I think it's probably one of the first American games to get respectably close to that goal. I think there's room for improvement, but…
Clearly, the last boss fight was weak [laughs]…

...But compared to some of that other stuff.
I'm just giving you shit.

No, but come on, I have to tell you, you had something going on there that was really a little special.
But definitely, when we were making God of War, there was something about it that felt like…yeah, we were doing something

special. It sounds arrogant. But special from a standpoint…we were doing something emotional. And whether you play it like ICO or, say, Final Fantasy, and you cry, that was never the goal. But I think there's a soul to it; I think there's a heart to it. That's something I'm really, really proud of.

And something that's missing in almost everything we play.
I agree.

You know, part of what I felt, what I mentioned in my review, was that I was a little moved by the game. I actually felt something, like when I'm watching a good movie. I sat there transfixed at times. The way you layered in the story and presentation, the vulnerability of the character…
That whole thing is fascinating to me. I went to USC for film school. I never got in because my grades weren't good enough, but I took all the classes, and I made movies and all that. And a lot of the classes I took were critical studies where they would say things like, well, this is why the director did this, and I was always like, well, how do you really know that? When I was actually making this game, about halfway through, this was a game that was actually about something…to me. And I didn't know if anyone else was going to pick up on it or whatever, but when you look at the game, Ares is Sony, I am Kratos, and the whole game is about sacrificing everything for your work and what it does to your family, what it does to your soul. The game isn't all about that. But to me there was a subtext to it; there's something deeper underneath the surface. And it speaks to the point that we need more people who come to the job thinking like that, and appreciating that and understanding that. The real questions is: where do we get them from, how do we train them? I don't know. I don't really know.

Does it take changing the process entirely? We were talking before about scripting games more and having a more articulate, defined doc. But there seems to be the argument that it's not practical.
We have so many things in this industry that aren't set in stone. We don't have a script. We found a guy to direct our next game internally. But I would love to be able to have a standard format and be able to read his game and go, "This is what he wants to do." But games for a number of reasons are so fluid that it's really difficult to do that. There's so many things that get in the way. I was working with this comic book writer who I really like, and he's like, Dave, let's make a game together. And I want to work with this guy a lot, but the process of making a game is so fluid that he could write the greatest story in the world that we want to make that game off, and a programmer comes up with a new piece of tech, or the tech we thought would work isn't working. And everything just totally changes. It's so nonsolid, the process. Unless you're sort of being artistic on your toes, it's hard to have that script, to get it to really mean anything.

> "Ares is Sony, I am Kratos, and the whole game is about sacrificing everything for your work and...what it does to your soul."

Maybe impossible?
It may be. I think if the games business was created by different people, who said, "Look, we're gonna have one standard console. It's like VHS or Windows, and everyone makes that. And it's pretty much gonna be consistent for 10, 15 years, and it all becomes about the content." But so frequently it's just about being able to get something nice looking on the box, and that's where 50 percent of your effort goes… It's tough out there. I don't want to direct another internal game. There's a personal part of me that wants to very badly. I so want to take a two-month vacation and get back into it so, so much, but it takes so much of your life. It's just not like making movies...

So you go onto the next round of hardware, and it's triple the assets, triple the budget, triple whatever, and then what?
I'm kind of torn about all this. Creatively, I want to make games. But the system that exists right now to make the kind of game that I think would really be an artistic endeavor on the level I'd like to make, like a God of War, it just…it's just hard to find the reason.

And then the game doesn't even sell. Someone told me Lorne Lanning was pretty bummed about Oddworld not doing as well as hoped.
I'm sure it's not. That's weird, because on one hand Lorne should have known better, but at the same time, what's nice about him is that, kind of like me in some ways, I don't think he cares. I think he'd rather be out of the games business than having to make an off-road racer. He's a creative guy; he wants to express himself through his work.

That just frustrates me as a player, because I see a game like that as another special endeavor, and then no one pays attention. Are games like that being phased out?
I think financially, there's no choice… Well, yes, I think so, personally. I don't think there's room for games like this from a financial standpoint. Creatively, of course.

But all it comes down to is financially.
It does. God of War is a little better off, we'll see. But you know, God of War has some of the uphill battle that Stranger has to climb.

I guess I just want more expression in games. That's what I got out of God of War: something beyond the ordinary that I could feel. You walk away with so much

more.
You got something out of it that was emotional, and I certainly put something into it that was emotional, so I'm grateful that you got that. But for me, I would have rather crashed and burned and gotten fired and this would be the last game I would ever make. I don't want to live my life like that; I don't want to do things that aren't interesting and emotional. You have to be willing to go, "This is what I want to do, and f*** all if I'm not going to do it." I just don't know how many people are out there like that.

It feels like not that many.
I think a part of it is arrogance. You have to believe you have something worth saying. And maybe you don't and then you make a fool of yourself. That's okay; I've certainly done it. But yeah, you're kind of in a tough place. The God of War team, we didn't get along all that well. I really have a lot of respect for them, and I'd like to think it goes both ways. I was never mean to anybody. There was that sense of, why is this that important to you? Just trust me, it's important.

And again, I felt that obsessive detail in the game.
I'm hoping the guys see the reviews and go, "Okay, it's not that Jaffe was right or wrong; it's not that we were right or wrong. It's that, you know what, if you wanna step up, step up. It's the details, it's important."

Yeah, games are becoming such big productions. And just when I think that's what I really want, I play something like Lumines, a game I am hugely addicted to, and it's really nice being able to get caught up in something pure and simple. But even on paper, there just don't seem to be that many games out there, big or small, with much vision.
And I wonder how much it has to do with...it's interesting. You look at drama; drama never really had any problem being drama. It seems like drama, from the first cave paintings or whatever, from the beginning, people understood somewhat the concept of telling stories, and obviously down the line it got refined. But being able to find emotion in storytelling was always there. With games, if you look back at the first recorded game, three, four thousand years ago in India with Pachisi, I think, they weren't trying to infuse a story onto Pachisi. It's only since recently have we had this idea we have to make our games emotional. Why are some of us, myself included...? It's funny, it's almost like religion. We are so convinced this is just the way that it is, it has to be. But if you really look at things realistically, there really is no indication that games can be that. We want them to be that, but how far can we go? It may just be wishful thinking.

Well, I did feel something in God of War.
But look how much we had to do to get even a little emotion from you. You put in all this work, and you got just this little bit of emotion out of it. And you can go rent a DVD for a few bucks, get this $300K indie film and be bawling by the end of it.

Maybe gamemakers need to stop trying to be filmmakers and just embrace what is so unique about the interactive medium. Blending the two ideas into something entirely different. For God of War, the story wasn't at all complex, but it was the way interaction and narrative came together that elevated it.
And that was actually intentional. The story started out a lot more complex. But you play the game in your head and you think: people are gonna have hours between this story segment and this story segment. You can't make it so complex, you get to a point where you're like, "So what was this all about, what am I doing now?" We had to make it a simple story. You don't want to get into that RPG thing where you have the story and halfway through you've lost it.
What a delicate balance.
Yeah, I do sometimes wonder...on God of War, there are a few things, like I asked myself, "What can I do with metaphorical mechanics?"

> "But for me, I would have rather crashed and burned and gotten fired and this would be the last game I would ever make."
>
> David Jaffe, design director, God of War

Which you obviously went with.
Yeah, but the question becomes, did anybody get that? And does it make them feel something?

Well, that's one of the big areas of the game I did feel something. I mean, you can only pull so much from the central gameplay, and it definitely worked so well, but there's a lot of similar, good gameplay out there. But you communicated through the visuals, the weight of the story, and in some almost ineffable way, you translated that weight into the actual play.
One of the things I was thinking, like that whole cage thing, where you push that guy into the flames to be sacrificed. How many people are gonna play that and actually feel something, as opposed to simply, the goal is to get this here. It's nothing but mechanics. It's just really tough. I don't have the answers. I'd love to write a book about all this, but the answers just aren't entirely there yet. I feel like God of War is an emotional piece, and I'm grateful you're picking that up, but I don't necessarily understand... [pauses]

I was actually going to ask you just how calculated it all was; did some of it just happen?
No, it didn't just happen, but, well... It's kind of like when you write a story, you write stuff, even in Twisted Metal, and you realize after the fact that, hey, I was saying something I didn't even realize was going to be there. On God of War, there was a sense of just following your gut, and going "This just feels right." And I knew, because of that, something interesting was going to come out of it. If someone said, "Tell me how you did that, tell me how to do that," or more importantly, "Jaffe, go make God of War 2 and do that better," I'd be like, "I don't know, I'm just going to follow my gut again."

You know, that tends to be the creative process. Sometimes it's an extension of yourself and you can't define it. You look at like Phillip K. Dick, who said he isn't writing a story—he's recreating a reality he thinks already exists.
Ryan's gonna think I'm crazy, call Kaz [Hirai, Sony president and COO] and say, "Fire that Jaffe, he's nuts." But I've had conversations with Kratos in my head. I mean, I know he's not real, I'm not an idiot, but he's really a part of me, just as I'm sure he's a part of Charlie, who did the artwork.

But that's the expression I'm talking about. I don't hear this very often in gamemaking. I just don't think there's a lot of it out there.
Well, that may be true. You know, again, we don't do a lot in this industry to attract those kinds of people. We have craftspeople. And we have great craftspeople; we'd be dead without them. I've been at Sony 12 years, and I've had a decent amount of success here, so it's not like I'm the new guy coming in fresh off the boat. I had a hard time dealing with the alienation of being the kind of guy trying to bring all this to the team and then they just don't want to deal with it. Which isn't to say they aren't artists and aren't creative,

because my god, they are. This game would be nothing without them. But it's hard to convince people you're trying to do something that is emotional. It's always like, "Ah, come on, we're just making a video game."

The violence in the game, how did you approach that, and were you really aware of needing to bring that immediate impact well beyond the obvious appeal? Most violence in games is pointless and packaged and you feel zero. God of War is empowering.
Obviously there's that area of the violence that was totally calculated, but not a commercial calculation… There is something, and I haven't figured it out yet. Like on Twisted Metal, it's amazing, and I look back and I think, oh, so that's what that was about, in terms of my personal life. There was such a desire to make a character that was… I'm looking at him right now, it's really weird… That really expressed this anger, an anger that's inside of me. This frustration, this visceral energy. Whether it's violent or not, I'll leave it up to people to decide. But it definitely came from a pure place. And then what became calculated was: how do we communicate that well? We went through tons of animators. Some people get it, some people don't. And we finally found two animators and they just f***ing got it. We did probably 30 animations of pulling the Medusa head off because it just wasn't quite right. And that's the type of thing the team got pissed at. They were like, "But isn't this good enough?" And sure, yeah, it's fine, in the sense that it's professional, but it doesn't give you that feeling in your gut.

What is your responsibility as a gamemaker?
I'm all for violence. I like over-the-top stuff. Love it. But there were two goals for this game. One was the adventure; the second was that I wanted to create a character that could allow players to sort of unleash their animalistic side. And this was again why it was so hard to find the right animator to do this—I wanted to allow the player to just go nuts and feel like a brutal, violent, sadistic character. I wanted you to almost find this zen-like state, where you just totally lose yourself to what you're doing. The whole point of the minigames was to further that feeling of really unleashing your dark side. It wasn't, "let's do it because we think violence is cool," it was "let's do it because we have a goal, that we want to tap into a side that I think we all have."

Yes! And this is exactly what we need more of—more thought behind it.
You know, it's funny, look at Burnout 3—the crashes are exceptionally violent. And god, I don't even want to say it because I'm superstitious, but the chances of anybody I love dying that way are a hell of a lot greater than someone going and ripping their head off or doing some extreme act. But nobody cares about that. And man, that's real, something that's happening every day, people getting into these awful crashes.

So what does being a game designer mean to you? What does God of War mean to you?
[long pause] It's funny, when I gave the speech to the team I kind of teared up, and I'm gonna do it again… The thing is, when you grow up playing games, you love games as you're growing up, and you see what they do to you. Wow…I don't know. I want to give you a good answer; this is a tough question. In my speech, I said sometimes that's all people have in entertainment. And I think a lot of times, when you grow up and it's not always that easy, there's a sense now as an adult making games that I think you know that you are providing that for other people. I remember going to Service Merchandise as a kid with my dad and buying Atari 2600 cartridges. We didn't have a ton of money, and that was a big deal to go out and buy a game. And I remember going to Red Lobster afterwards and my brother and I just poring over the manual as we waited for our food to come, and we couldn't wait to get home and play. Everything in the manual meant something. We put a lot of effort into our manuals because of that reason, because I know people do care. So I think to me, when I design games now, there are people out there, and in this case certainly not kids—we didn't design this game for kids—there are players out there that this form of entertainment is special to them. There is a sense of responsibility that the team and I have; we have to entertain them. They are giving us time from their lives, and that's really what they have to depend on. This is how they escape. I don't know. I think it's kind of important. **play**

The expression of rage is empowering.

"Ryan's gonna think I'm crazy, call Kaz and say, 'Fire that Jaffe, he's nuts.' But I've had conversations with Kratos in my head."

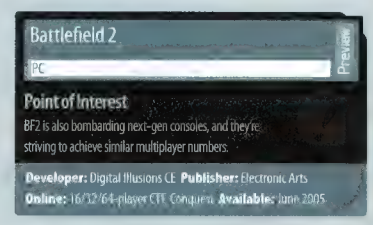
David Jaffe, design director, God of War

Battlefield 2

The biggest squad FPS project to date

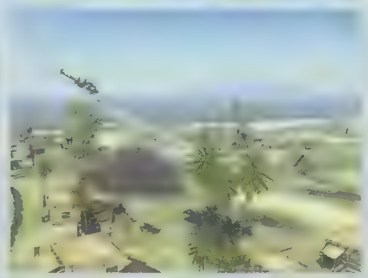
If there's one good thing about EA being a monstrously powerful financial force in the games industry, it's the budget they can afford to invest in a major title. If any other publisher committed to a squad shooter as ambitious and wide in scope as Battlefield 2, it's safe to say the results probably wouldn't live up to the proposed design. With Daddy EA-bucks airdropping cash bombs into DICE's Swedish headquarters, Battlefield 2 development looks more like production on a Bruckheimer action flick than a military FPS title. That said, Digital Illusions is an extremely talented developer and Battlefield 2 is, by far, their biggest, smartest and most detailed project to date. This is 64-player modern warfare between U.S., Chinese, and Middle-Eastern armies, fought across vast desert plains, through deep jungle bogs and beyond—featuring state-of-the-art land, air and sea vehicles. Beneath the incredible presentation, EA and DICE are also adding a new layer of depth to soldier classes and online rankings. We asked for additional mission parameters, and BF2 co-producer Mike Doran reported for duty.

Mike Griffin


Battlefield 2
PC
Preview
Point of Interest
BF2 is also bombarding next-gen consoles, and they're striving to achieve similar multiplayer numbers.
Developer: Digital Illusions CE Publisher: Electronic Arts
Online: 16/32/64-player CTF, Conquest Available: June 2005

"...Battlefield 2 is, by far, their biggest, smartest and most detailed project to date."

This Havok chopper launches powerful wire-guided anti-tank ordnance at incoming armored divisions. An offshore carrier will scramble an F-15 to intercept.



Interview

Mike Doran, co-producer, Electronic Arts

play: When did initial production begin, and roughly how large is the current team?
Mike Doran: Battlefield 2 has been in production since early 2003. Currently between development, production and testing we have about 250 people working on the game full time. This is actually the biggest test team for any EA title to date, which is an impressive statistic.

BF2 will include seven different soldier "kits," but this class system goes beyond the norm; players will actually be able to develop and improve their soldiers in BF2. What sort of performance grading is used to determine character progress?
In Battlefield 2, players will have the option to play on ranked servers. While playing on ranked servers, the points a player accumulates by capturing control points, killing players, repairing, healing and re-supplying teammates are all tracked. At certain milestones, players are awarded a new rank, and with certain ranks come unlocks: players can access a new weapon for each of the kits.

With regards to persistent online character profiles: will they be stored on EA's server and viewable by the player community?
The persistent systems are owned and maintained by EA in order to protect the validity of the stats. Players can browse what we call "BFHQ" in the menu system of Battlefield 2. While browsing BFHQ, players will find a variety of stats for their specific account, as well as the leaderboard where they can view stats for players all over the world.

What are the biggest improvements to in-game communication and tactical team execution, compared to previous efforts in the genre?
Three main areas where communication has been improved in Battlefield 2 are the additions of a Squad and Commander system, VOIP (Voice-over-IP) support, and the redesign of the radio commands. While playing Battlefield 2, players have the option to create or join a squad. Think of this as an in-game "buddy list" that lasts for the duration of the map. Squad leaders can assign waypoints to their squad that appear in the world, so they can all work together to capture the next flag, or take out an enemy tank. The Commander has the ability to direct all the squads as well as call for a UAV drone, satellite scan, supply drop or my personal favorite—the artillery strike. VOIP support

was a natural fit for Battlefield 2; it greatly enhances the experience when you can easily coordinate attacks with your teammates by talking to them in real time. In Battlefield 2, the radio system is much easier to use: simply hold the Q key and a communication rose appears. You can then use your mouse to highlight the radio command you want, and left click to issue it. It's a much simpler and more effective system than the one used in the previous Battlefield games.

Battlefield 2 employs extremely potent visual elements. What are some of this engine's best features, and how will the raw presentation benefit?
Some of the most satisfying visuals in Battlefield 2 involve the all-new rag doll system; coming around the corner of a crowded middle-eastern street to witness a tank shell send a soldier flying into the side of a building—and looking down as he slumps to the ground—is truly a satisfying moment. It's even better when you're in the tank. Recently, some of the production guys went back to play a few rounds of Battlefield 1942, and it's amazing when you consider the visuals of that game; if you look at the particle effects from Battlefield 1942 to Battlefield 2, it's like night and day. The visual upgrades in Battlefield 2 are evident everywhere you look. Players will also notice subtle, but immersive, attention to detail, such as birds that occasionally fly

"...ultimately, the game is about who's got the most skill with the mouse and the keyboard, not what kit you chose."

from bushes when shots are fired. And if you look closely enough, you'll see an homage to the Battlefield heritage on some of the city walls. I'll let Battlefield players find this for themselves.

BF2 scales its maps to adjust environment size based on player quantity. What were the most important considerations when re-sizing each map?
One of the goals we were striving for when the various map sizes were designed was to make a 16-player setup just as fun as a 64-player setup. We were able to accomplish this by paying special attention to the control point placement and the mix of vehicles available on each map size.

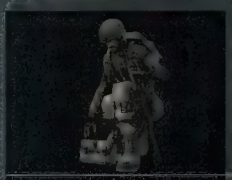
In previous BF games, each weapon and vehicle had its own neutralizing counterpart. Have you maintained this scheme, and will certain class kits be a superior choice to use specific armaments?
Battlefield 2 is built on the same rock vs. paper vs. scissors values that made Battlefield 1942 such a blast to play. However, to bring the gameplay to the next level, we did add some features for the support abilities of the various kits. For example, a medic can hop into a jeep and the jeep will then grant a healing radius to any teammates in the area. The same can be said for repairing and re-supplying teammates. Beyond that, there aren't specific kit bonuses or requirements for any particular armament; ultimately, the game is about who's got the most skill with the mouse and the keyboard, not what kit you chose.

We're predicting that BF2's Conquest mode may be the most popular, with its explosive 64-player possibilities. What kind of objectives and actions will players experience in a typical round?
The primary objective is once again to capture and hold the various control points on the map, but Battlefield 2 also features destructible bridges that add a tactical element to the gameplay. If you've got a control point on one side of a canyon and an enemy tank is approaching, why not blow the bridge before the enemy can cross? Keep in mind that if he has an engineer with him, the bridge can be repaired...

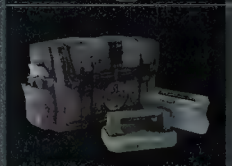
The bread & butter of BF2 will be its multiplayer combat, but will you also be including a full campaign game?
Battlefield is adamantly a multiplayer-focused franchise, but we realize the importance of single-player content. Given that, Battlefield 2 easily has the best single-player content of any Battlefield game to date. The AI is much better all around. It's awesome to see a teammate heal, repair or revive you...and if you get too close to an enemy soldier, he just might pull his knife out and rush you!

Given the state of the world, some political discussion may result from Battlefield 2's featured factions. How important was it to portray these factions in a certain light, within the context of today's global tension?
While the setting of Battlefield 2 has been inspired by the modern-day era, we made a conscious effort to not copy any specific events or locations. Our MEC (Middle-Eastern Coalition) army is a fictional organized army—*not* a terror-based group in any way. At the end of the day, we care most about building a fast-paced, fun game...not cashing in on any political opportunities. **play**

MEC



Medical Unit: Medics heal and revive teammates using health packs and defibrillators. They can also use the shock paddles to deliver a powerful—possible deadly—jolt to enemies. When medics hop aboard certain vehicle types, the vehicle gains a healing radius effect for passengers and nearby teammates.



Defibrillator: Injured soldiers may lie on the battlefield in shock, experiencing a rapid or weakened cardiac rhythm. This can be life-threatening if not treated quickly. The Defibrillator delivers an electrical shock straight to the heart, reducing the fibrillation to a consistent, effective rhythm.

SU-34 Flanker: The SU-34 is a long-range fighter and land-based striker. It is loaded with 10 weapon stations along its wings, carrying air-to-air and air-to-ship missiles as well as guided and unguided rockets and bombs. Its distinctive flat nose contains a terrain-avoidance radar, which allows the SU-34 to fly at very low altitudes.

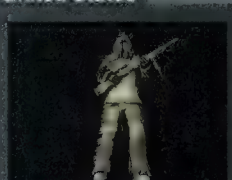
Chinese

Anti-Tank Unit: In modern warfare, the AT Unit is a fearless David to the roving tank Goliaths, but this soldier's sling packs a pebble with the force of a dozen boulders. It takes a great deal of strength and tenacity to stand one's ground versus incoming tanks, but a successful hit can instantly change the course of battle.

AT-Eryx: This short-range anti-armor missile system packs enough explosive impact to immobilize or defeat any modern battle tank. It is small and portable, and can be shoulder mounted or latched to a tripod configuration. The missile itself allows the gunner to transmit course corrections remotely.

WZ551 APC: The six-wheeled WZ551 Armored Personnel Carrier provides quick infantry deployment to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on almost any battlefield. It's fully amphibious and fitted with a heavy machine gun as well as nuclear, biological and chemical shielding systems.

United States



Sniper Unit: The sniper can move quickly between concealment points, wearing light camouflage apparel and accessories. While the sniper is especially adept at disappearing into the crevices of a battlefield, it's his deadly long-distance aim that strikes fear in the enemy. A dozen enemies may fall before the sniper is found.

M24 Sniper Rifle: Designed for SWAT teams, this bolt-action sniper rifle has a maximum effective range of 875 yards. It uses a 10 power telescopic sight with a range-finding reticle. Its stock is comprised of a composite Kevlar, graphite and fiberglass base mounted to an aluminum bedding, making it very light and strong.

US-M1A2 Tank: The steel-encased M1A2 Abrams is the driving force behind the US military's armored division. It can fire explosive anti-tank or depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds from its 120mm cannon using a stabilized mobile firing control system. The M1A2 is effective in almost any hostile environment.

Fable: The Lost Chapters

A little TLC goes a long way

Fable, our 2004 Game of the Year, is set to be transplanted, enhanced and extended for PC when Lionhead and Microsoft release Fable: The Lost Chapters for Windows later this year. The PC port was not completely unexpected, but Microsoft's decision to support Lionhead in assembling an expanded version of the Xbox hit was certainly a pleasant surprise. This version could be viewed as the Director's Cut, adding in many scenes and features that, thanks to development constraints, were previously left on the cutting room floor.

Ironically, one of Fable's greatest assets—the sheer depth of interaction with the world—also proved to be one of its most underused features by many Xbox players, who chose to blaze through the game along the most linear path they could find. Instead of enjoying a solid 30 to 40 hours of deep character development, experiencing the dozens of nuances incorporated into Fable's world and AI, some gamers plugged into a generic mission sequence and called it a day after 15 hours. When it comes to adventure titles, PC gamers tend to have a more thorough and demanding mindset. It probably has something to do with the fact that you can't rent PC games, nor trade them in as easily as console. So when there is major depth to be found in a PC RPG, you get the most from your purchase by fully exploring it. In Fable: The Lost Chapters, Lionhead is adding new side quests, expanded editions of existing quests, and implementing all-new missions that take gamers in completely new story directions to regions of the world that were previously only hinted at. After all, they need somewhere to put the new Silver Chests, Demon Doors, secret treasure and dragons!

All these new quests and world areas will naturally include never-before-seen NPCs, some of them rather nasty, and Fable: TLC will add more spells, weapons, combat techniques, augmentations and armor to help prevent you from getting maimed. Customization will also be kicked up a notch, with new gear and accessories, and the extremes of good and evil, battle scars, and age will have completely new visuals. In turn, the AI has been equipped with new expressions to cheer you, fear you, mock you and even cozy-up with some virtual flirtation. If you were spending an inordinate amount of time tweaking your character's appearance in the original game, prepare to lose yourself in TLC's customization.

This re-mastered and expanded adventure through Albion will benefit from fully optimized graphics.

Along with all the new, restored, and enhanced content, Lionhead has a team dedicated to bringing Fable: The Lost Chapters up to the technical standards of current PC titles. Where the Xbox is based on Dx8-era graphics, PC games have been using Dx9 almost exclusively for over a year. Fable looks incredible on Xbox, but with Dx9, literally every visual element will receive a facelift, from the accuracy of lighting and shadow to the quality of texture effects. The new content will look especially striking, and everything will load much faster, if at all (going from 64 MB to 1 GB of RAM can do wonders). With regards to sound, besides the innate benefits of using the latest EAX for your effects (better echoes and reverb based on environment type), we're still waiting for confirmation of Russell Shaw's involvement with new music production. Cross your fingers.

Many details are still unknown about Fable: The Lost Chapters, including a possible online element where, perhaps, you can finally show your avatar to the world. The original game had its fair share of progress loopholes, i.e., allowing you to re-sell houses for enormous gold profit or attain Legendary weaponry—like Skorm's bow—with minor effort. Hopefully this will be addressed, because Fable: The Lost Chapters is probably one action-RPG that PC gamers will want to explore at the intended pace, from top to bottom.

Mike Griffin

Fable: The Lost Chapters
PC
Point of Interest
The newly added Dragon Continent was one of several major sections cut from the Xbox version of the game.
Online: None Available: September 2005

"After all, they need somewhere to put the new Silver Chests, Demon Doors, secret treasure and dragons!"

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Review

SWAT 4

Great update to the elite law enforcement classic

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows 2000/XP	Video: GeForce 4 TI 128MB
Processor: 2.4 GHz P4/Athlon 2500	Sound: Dx9 compatible
Memory: 512MB RAM	Online: Broadband

"This is accessible crime-fighting pulp with a dark, contemporary edge."

Recent squad-based titles like Star Wars: Republic Commando have demonstrated clever ways to simplify the controls and management of team AI, while sustaining a pretty consistent level of interaction with the environment. SWAT 4 delivers another fine implementation of squad control in a highly interactive setting of elite infiltration through the underbelly of urban America.

We expected a competent game from Irrational, as they've been rolling out quality titles, back-to-back, for the past year, but SWAT 4's attention to detail—gritty, violent and cinematic—came as a pleasant surprise. The built-in career missions have compact and effective plotlines that wouldn't be out of place in a prime-time cop show, with a pool of detailed criminal profiles extracted and mutated from popular film and literature. Mission briefings and reports are well written and acted, selling the complexity of each predicament with just enough Hollywood flair to stay interesting. This is accessible crime-fighting pulp with a dark, contemporary edge.

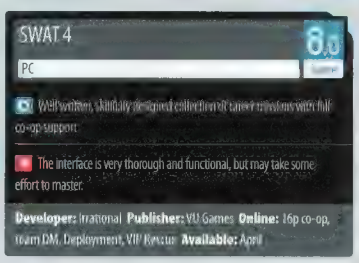
SWAT 4's clear contextual menu controls provide intuitive ways to execute breaking, entering, sniping and suppression tactics. It's a bit tricky initially to rotate assignments between the red and blue team pairs, but once you get a feel for their self-sufficiency, you'll choose fewer, and more accurate, commands. The controllable picture-in-picture-style helmet cams attached to each teammate provide some of the most hands-on close-quarters squad supervision to date. All aspects of the gameplay hinge upon precision: cuffing and tagging, gathering discarded weapons as evidence, or using stun, smoke and flash grenades when the situation demands. In one scenario, terrorized civilians quake in their heels in the aftermath of a spontaneous gang war inside a bustling nightclub. You and your squad arrive on the scene, screams and gunfire echoing in the distance, and you begin sweeping through the joint—expertly isolating each punk and cataloging every bystander until the building is completely secure. In encounters such as the above, the level design and enemy AI are always convincing enough to seal the deal and satisfy.

"Step out of the van and drop the pizza, mother f***er!"

All this potent squad movement plays out pretty well online, with rapid payoff for cooperative efforts when you take on career missions with human teammates. Competitive options will also keep SWAT 4 fresh for months after its release, with some cool modes like VIP Rescue. In this multiplayer contest, one of the SWAT team members randomly spawns as a VIP, and the rest of the team has to escort him to an extraction point. Meanwhile, the suspects (controlled by other players) try to kidnap him. If they can hold the VIP for two minutes, they're free to blow him away, thus winning the round. It's an intense hostage rescue tug-of-war.

This is the first new SWAT game on PC since 1999, and Irrational has done a fine job bringing the entire concept up to—and frequently beyond—current-day squad shooter standards. The game looks and sounds great, busting out a modified version of the ubiquitous Unreal Engine 2.0 with heavy-duty pixel shaders and plenty of Havok reactions in the cluttered urban environs. Irrational resurrected Tribes last year in grand style, and they've pulled another Sierra classic from the ether, building a fine update to the SWAT legacy. Let's just hope that SWAT 4 receives better post-retail support from VU than Tribes: Vengeance did...

Mike Griffin


SWAT 4
8.0
PC
Well-written, skillfully designed collection of career missions with full co-op support
The interface is very thorough and functional, but may take some effort to master.
Developer: Irrational Publisher: VU Games Online: 16p co-op, team DM, Deployment, VIP Rescue Available: April

Psychonauts

Trip the light Raz-tastic

As much as I love Psychonauts on Xbox, playing it on PC with the added res—now that I've discovered a controller that actually simulates console play—is a smidgeon better. Arguably the best epic platformer since the Rare/Miyamoto days of N64, Psychonauts is also probably the only platformer palatable to a PC audience, as it's not at all fruity or cute, and happens to be absolutely bursting with intelligently witty dialogue, deeply nuanced gameplay and a cast of characters that resembles a high-speed collision between a bus-load of circus freaks and a Day of the Dead parade. Tim Schafer and company at Double Fine weave a mean tale of telekinetic wunderkinder and introduce it through brilliant adventure/platforming levels stemming from a massive mountainside summer camp of a hub where scouring the terrain is as much fun as tapping the minds of those in need of Raz's special brand of psychic enema. Raging discos, war-torn battlegrounds, twisted urban sprawls, asylums and velvet paintings are your oyster; cleaning out the cobwebs and figments of the imagination your forte… Become Raz and discover what it's like to be a Psychonaut. You may never want to come back to reality again. **Dave Halverson**

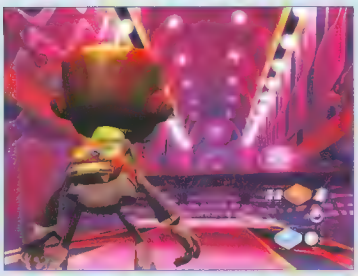
Psychonauts **9.5**

A mind-meltingly cool romp that feeds the cerebral and the twitch-minded. Innovative, insanely well acted, and put to a great soundtrack.

The end is the end… no diving back in as the new Raz to clean things out (you can, just earlier). If there's a sequel, of course, all is forgiven.

Developer: Double Fine **Publisher:** Majesco
Online: None **Available:** April

"Arguably the best epic platformer since the Rare/Miyamoto days of N64..."



SWG: Rage of the Wookiees

Let the Wookiees win

I'm an avid player of Star Wars Galaxies (I've been playing since the July '03 launch), and it sure seems like LucasArts and SOE are running one tight ship. Six months after the release of SWG's first expansion pack, Jump to Lightspeed, comes their second (just in time for the theatrical release of *Revenge of the Sith*): Rage of the Wookiees. RotW promises to add on the exciting Wookiee planet Kashyyyk, ripe for exploring. New content abounds: over 100 story-driven quests, starships and cybernetic limbs for players to experience. Also, space mining will be introduced, giving space-faring *Star Wars* fanatics the chance to sell high-end minerals to more timid crafting types on the ground.

All in all, RotW has me intrigued, but I still have so many questions. How will the new cybernetic arms hold up in PvP? They have been touted to give combat bonuses…will non-expansion players be left in the cold? Also, it will be incredibly interesting to see how the space mining system shakes down to crafters and the rest of the ground game.

On a side note, RotW will be released simultaneously with the free SWG Combat Upgrade download. New armor, weapons and a completely redesigned combat system holds promise with old and new players alike…let's just hope that Jedi aren't the all-powerful PvP machines we know them to be now. **Ashley Esqueda**

Star Wars Galaxies: Rage of the Wookiees — Preview

PC

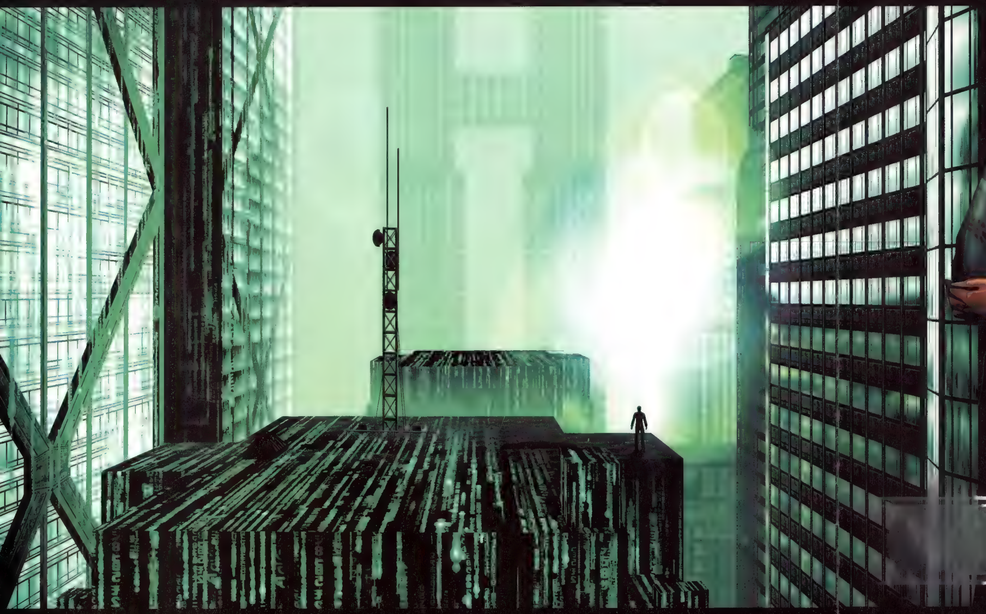
Point of Interest

Rage of the Wookiees will include many vehicles inspired by *Episode III*, including Anakin's Jedi Starfighter.

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment **Publisher:** LucasArts
Online: Massively multiplayer **Available:** May

"All in all, RotW has me intrigued, but I still have so many questions."

I know why, night after night,
you sit in front of your computer.



THE MATRIX ONLINE

THE MATRIX IS ONLINE. JACK IN NOW.

The Matrix Online is the future of the Matrix, picking up right where the trilogy left off. The revolution is over, but within the Matrix a secret war still rages—a war of control between the Machines, the Exiles, and the people of Zion. Come join the continuing storyline of the Matrix where you decide who to oppose and what to believe. Only your courage and perseverance can protect the legacy of Neo's sacrifice: Jack in.

- Explore every inch of The Matrix: Mega City—the most realistic urban environment of any MMO. The entire city, including every room of every building, is in play.
- Defeat your enemies using devastating martial arts maneuvers and gunplay. Breakthrough MMO technology produces rich animations and hyper-kinetic battle sequences.
- Escape character regret. Reconfigure your character's abilities and performance on demand.
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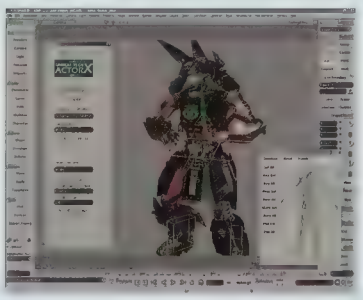
THE
MATRIX
ONLINE
THE
SUCCUBUS

Postscript

Softimage XSI partnering with Epic on Unreal tools

Softimage decided it was time to get serious with grassroots consumers last year. They targeted the mod community, partnered with Valve to release a free Half-Life 2 XSI Mod Tool, and hundreds of awesome maps have been released since. Next stop for Softimage and XSI: the Unreal Engine, present and future. Epic's Unreal Actor X exporter can now feed straight into the XSI mod tools, ideal for both developers and enthusiasts to create characters, world assets and environments in any number of genres.

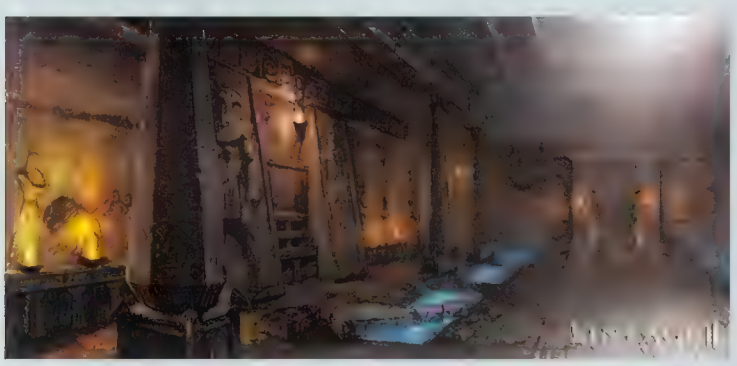


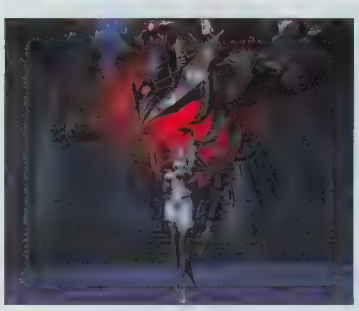
Nvidia reaches 512 MB in 6800 series

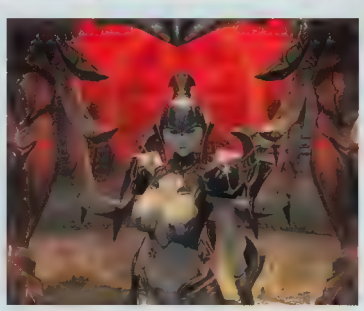
It was only a matter of time. Nvidia has announced a 512 MB version of their GeForce 6800 Ultra series. To reiterate, that's five-hundred and twelve megs of RAM in a consumer video card. The RAM itself will come in the very fast DDR3 format. The mad numbers don't end there, however. The new 6800 board will also support SLI. This is Nvidia's Scalable Link Interface technology: a double slot PCI Express motherboard that allows two identical Nvidia graphics cards to connect and render together simultaneously. Yes, you can now own a PC with twin 512 meg GeForce 6800 Ultras. Purely speculating, based on previous benchmarks, this set-up could theoretically run Doom 3 in its "Ultra" mode at 90-100fps.

Lineage II – Chronicle 3: Rise of Darkness

NCsoft and developer Team E&G will be launching the third free content expansion for Lineage II in early May 2005. Among many new features arriving for the PvP thoroughbred, players will be able to own huge flying Wyvern mounts and train-up several new disciplines in a Sub-Class System. Lineage II continues to be one of the most visually striking titles in the genre.





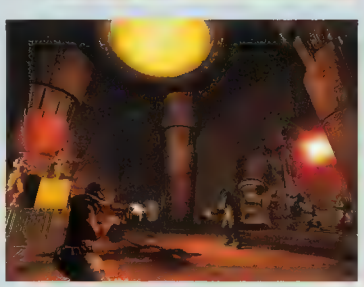


Introducing F.E.A.R.

Striking new images from the real-time introductory sequence that kicks off Monolith's psycho sci-fi thriller FPS, F.E.A.R.

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil

Resurrection of Evil, Doom 3's first official mission pack, will be available by the time you read this. RoE features new multiplayer modes and maps, the return of the double-barreled shotgun, and a new cast of hell spawn now taking orders from the damnable Betruger.



Nerve and id have improved Doom 3's multiplayer component in Resurrection of Evil by raising the minimum player count to eight and adding explosive Capture-the-Flag maps designed by Threewave Software, renowned for their CTF content in all three Quake titles.

NPD PC Game Sales

01. The Sims 2 University - EA
02. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
03. The Sims 2 - EA
04. Aquazone Desktop Garden 1.0 - Allume Systems
05. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
06. Star Wars: Republic Commando - LucasArts
07. The Sims Deluxe - EA
08. Star Wars: KOTOR II: The Sith Lords - LucasArts
09. Halo: Combat Evolved - Microsoft
10. MVP Baseball 2005 - EA

Metal Gear Acid — PSP — 7.0 Score

A deeply strategic take on Metal Gear that works well.

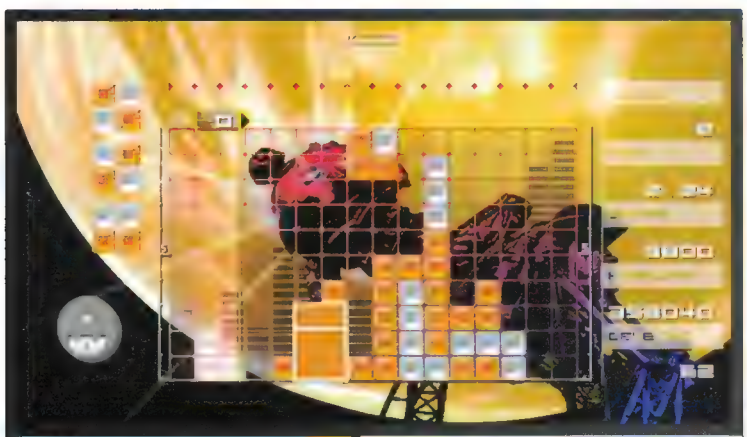
A lot of the cool Metal Gear gameplay elements are MIA

Developer: KCE Japan **Publisher:** Konami
Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** March

"...how much you enjoy it depends a lot on what you expect from the game."

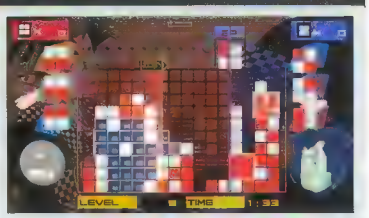
By now you've certainly heard that Metal Gear Acid is not the typical Metal Gear game, but the question may still remain: is it any good? The answer is most decidedly "yes," but how much you enjoy it depends a lot on what you expect from the game. Acid removes most of the action from the familiar "Tactical Espionage Action" tagline and ups the tactical aspects quite a bit by turning the gameplay into a turn-based affair with cards as the basis. The system works well, but it means that there's a lot more waiting as enemies take their turns and a lot of zooming out to the overhead map as you meticulously study enemy patterns and fields of vision. The resultant increased strategy combined with challenging enemies ups the tensions substantially, and slipping past foes unseen is quite rewarding; in terms of gameplay depth, however, it feels that a lot of the cool stuff has been stripped away—no more sneaking up behind enemies and choking them out, fewer satisfying moves. Fortunately, summon cards featuring MG characters past and the ability to control two heroes side-by-side help make up for the loss. As expected, the story is completely convoluted, but the twists are still surprising (if not infuriating), resulting in a worthy but very different addition to the franchise. **Chris Hoffman**

Acid may be turn-based, but it still features many signature Metal Gear weapons.



Lumines — PSP — 9.0 Score

Developer: Q Entertainment **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** March



So here's the deal: falling from the familiar invisible ceiling are blocks, arranged in two-by-two paired colors. Geometrically match the like colors to form bigger blocks, and if you merely have some of those like-colored components touching, a special block can detonate anything that's linked on. Been there, done that—absolutely. But what you haven't dealt with in a puzzle game before is a cycling bar that moves to the time signature of the music, clearing the blocks you've constructed on each pass. The infectious music crescendos and receives subtle embellishments in line with the dynamic of your success. Each time you advance to a new skin, you find yourself tuned into an entirely new mode of sounds that rearrange the tone and feel. Transfixing. **Brady Fiechter**

Ridge Racer — PSP — 9.0 Score

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco
Multiplayer: 8p versus **Available:** March

I have fantastic memories of playing the original Ridge Racer when the PlayStation launched, and now I have even better ones of playing this awesome Ridge Racer for the PSP. Make no mistake, this game got the Namco A-treatment, and you'll be dazzled by the intro, interface and graphics. Then you'll be astounded by how much game there is here. This is basically a compilation of all Ridge Racer tracks, and, as I never tire of opining, these are simply the best video game courses that have ever been designed. And, of course, it only gets better from here as you recall the utter joy of sliding these machines around the tracks at full speed. It still feels absolutely amazing. I don't even mind the cheesy nitro boost they've added. Final brilliant feature: eight-player wireless multiplayer. **Michael Hobbs**

PSP | Score

A beautiful fighter that combines all three Darkstalkers games.

Not much is new. Control is a bit unforgiving

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom
Multiplayer: 2p versus/4p tournament **Available:** March

"...a pixel-precise 2D fighting game that builds upon its Street Fighter roots..."

Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower might not bring much new to the world of fighting games—other than being able to play one of the most gorgeous fighters ever on the go—but what it does, it does quite well. Basically an enhanced version of Vampire Chronicle (released for the Dreamcast in Japan), The Chaos Tower combines the distinctive gameplay systems and character variations from the previous Darkstalkers games—Darkstalkers, Night Warriors and Vampire Savior (aka Darkstalkers 3)—into one wonderful fighting extravaganza: a pixel-precise 2D fighting game that builds upon its Street Fighter roots with even flashier special moves, more techniques and characters ripped straight from classic horror. The game looks thoroughly amazing, with little animation flourishes everywhere that you rarely see anymore and I'd almost forgot existed. The controls, however, just seem a little unforgiving on the PSP compared to the game's console and arcade counterparts; fortunately, there's a simplified control mode if that suits you better, although it isn't nearly as satisfying. In other aspects though, Chronicle is fully loaded, with tons of unlockable artwork made available through the game's extensive Tower mode, which is packed with challenges and will keep even the most hardcore Darkstalkers fans glued until their batteries run dry. If you like 2D fighting and have a PSP, this one's a keeper. **Chris Hoffman**

PSP | Preview

Developer: SCEI **Publisher:** Bandai
Multiplayer: TBA **Available:** May

Rather than focusing on Kusanagi and Batou, Stand Alone Complex for PSP features four key members of Section 9, adding Togusa for stealth and Saito for sniping to the fray to go along with the FPS guise, which in this case might be considered somewhat of a drawback by the series' minions, present company included. Coming off of the impressive PS2 version, Bandai's got a lot to live up to, and in a series that's all about the characters, somehow their forearms don't seem all that exciting (we finally got a look at the Major, and now they've gone and taken her back). Guess the Tachikomas will have to carry this one, along with the Wi-Fi multiplayer and trading—swapping weapons, parts and data. Tachikomas figure big into the mix, as you train and customize your very own throughout the game, adding weapons and parts to bolster performance (zzzz). Can you say "Hook to mask garden-variety FPS"? I knew you could. Funny thing is, it'll likely sell more than the PS2 game, so why not just make with the port? I hope I'm wrong about this one. **Dave Halverson**

PSP | 7.5 Score

Developer: SCEI **Publisher:** Sony
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

While chasing monkeys around with a net is certainly a silly proposition, it's the way in which SCEA goes about it that makes it so much fun, and it's better than ever on PSP. Ostensibly the critically acclaimed PS game with added Wi-Fi and juiced visuals, On the Loose is a forever-evolving gadget-fest in which spiky red-haired fourth-grader Spike must capture packs of crafty mind-controlled simians by way of slingshot, radar, RC car, tank, underwater net or the tried-and-true club to the head in an effort to thwart Spector—a one-time monkey turned intelligent being via a contraption known as the Peak Point Helmet—from taking over the world. Dressed up as a techno-laced (great music here) platforming area hopper, the game's vast array of short- to mid-length levels suits the handheld market better than it ever did on console, and the game controls decidedly well even sans the dual analog control that made it a standout when it launched for PlayStation. Of all the launch titles, while it may be the most basic visually, I find Ape Escape the most entertaining. Once a great game, always a great game. **Dave Halverson**

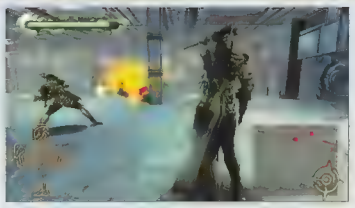
PSP — Score

Developer: Incognito **Publisher:** Sony
Multiplayer: 6p versus **Available:** March

Must all PSP games completely blow away expectations? I honestly expected Head-On to be something of a Twisted Metal lite, but what I found instead was meaty demolition filled with massive battlegrounds, ultra-smooth 3D, balls-out gameplay, Wi-Fi multi-player and a cavalcade of derelict combatants. Any game that begins with a virtual metal band waling away over the first venue is okay in my book. Buckling in for the carnage ahead, there's a control scheme for every palette—cycling and firing your main and ancillary weapons is effortless—and the action is decidedly down-and-dirty Twisted Metal at its best, i.e. hardcore chase and destroy. Incognito has given PSP early adopters the ultimate stomping grounds to let our inhibitions fly, loaded to the gills with all the nuances that make this the king of the car-bashing class. Strategic weapon and health placement, character specific specials, upgrades galore that add significantly to the gameplay, secret spots, minigames. . .it's all here, and all in spectacular 3D on par with the PS2 (only widescreen, tee-hee). A burning hot game of TM that's every bit as cool as Black, Head-On rocks from the outset. **Dave Halverson**

PSP — Score

Developer: Neverland Company/Hudson **Pub:** Konami
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** April



There are a few things I really appreciate about Rengoku: Tower of Purgatory, those being the unique, atmospheric, slightly disturbing art style, the thought-provoking story and the tons of customization options. Rengoku features loads of weapons to equip your character with and a dozen parameters that can be leveled up, creating a powerhouse android of your own spec as you climb the titular tower. The rest of the game didn't receive quite the same attention, however, with some incredibly boring level design and bot-on-bot combat—the game's main element—that lacks the precision, collision and reaction that a game of this type desperately needs. Rengoku comes close to hitting the mark, but misses by the fine details that separate the good from the mediocre. **Chris Hoffman**

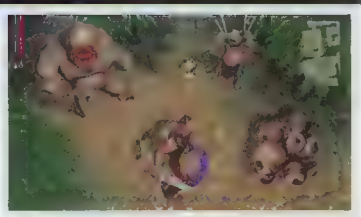
PSP — Score

Developer: Vicarious Visions **Publisher:**
Multiplayer: None **Available:** March

Since I haven't spent much time with the console versions of Spider-Man 2, I can't really say how this game compares, but I can say that the Peter Parker's first handheld venture into full 3D is one fine action-adventure. As you'd expect from a Spidey game, the action is fluid and loaded with familiar wall-crawling and web-slinging antics, and better yet, Spidey's arsenal evolves as you proceed, thanks to unlockable abilities and combos. Additional story elements and their accompanying stages mesh very nicely into the movie framework as well. Although the game has a few problems—the typically troublesome camera in tight spaces, a jump button that responds to the button release instead of the press—this is a solid launch title that just about anyone will enjoy. **Chris Hoffman**

PSP — Score

Dev: Sony Online Entertainment **Pub:** Sony Online Entertainment **Multiplayer:** 4p co-op **Available:** March

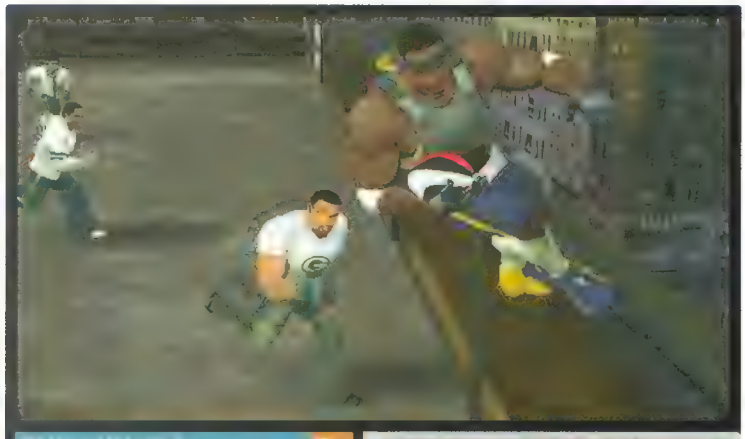


If you're a fan of American-style action-RPGs like Champions of Norrath and Diablo, then you pretty much know what you're getting with Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade—that being varied character classes, tons of weapons and equipment that changes your hero's on-screen appearance, customizable stats and abilities, and lots of button-mashy-hacky-slashy gameplay amidst a vast world filled with danger. As with similar games, playing in Untold Legends' multiplayer mode helps rectify what can otherwise quickly become a monotonous experience, but it doesn't help with the game's other problems: graphics that don't particularly push the power of the PSP and fun-crippling loading times that are often in excess of 30 seconds. **Chris Hoffman**

PSP — Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA
Multiplayer: 8p versus **Available:** March

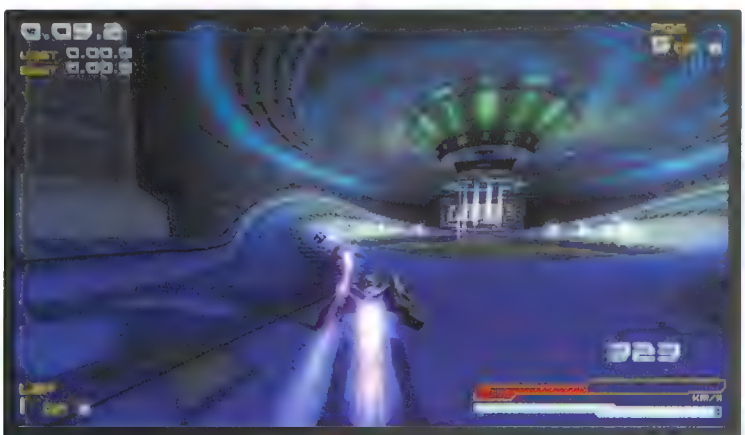
This one's a tough call: I've played the Street series probably more than any games this generation in terms of raw hours, yet the rocking idea of taking NBA Street on the road turned into less of an addiction than expected. And yet that's not to say NBA Street Showdown isn't a success, holding especial appeal to someone new to the court. The game looks fantastic, has an assortment of satisfying extras and minigames and the typically extensive create-a-player option, but somehow the energy of the console games has been slightly diminished. Really my only focused gripe though is with the leaner trick system, which has been downgraded from implementation across the PS2's four shoulder buttons to a single PSP button. Small gripe, cuz, well, it's protable! **Brady Fiechter**



PSP — Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

Essentially yet another straight port in terms of central gameplay and looks—and yet another addictive one at that—NFL Street 2 Unleashed feels a bit more preserved than its NBA counterpart. The no-rules street ball is kept fast and simple, with a limited playbook offering just enough selection to feed the strategy, and a basic control scheme that fits right in with the rugged pick-up-and-play style. Like all the games for the brand-new PSP, it feels like a new experience duking it out over Wi-Fi, and all the options and build-your-team functions keep the replay high; side games can be as much fun as the main game itself. I did have to come to grips with the new PSP analog control—the players move a little askew—but hey, for a handheld game of street ball, NFL Street rocks. **Brady Fiechter**



PSP — Score

Developer: Studio Liverpool **Publisher:** Sony
Multiplayer: 8p versus **Available:** March

I have loved Wipeout since the original PlayStation version, and I really wanted this PSP version to be a knockout. I wasn't disappointed. Wipeout Pure is as impressive in Ridge Racer in its presentation, with stunning graphics for a handheld game. And then, of course, there is the beautifully conceived gameplay that is equal parts racing and weapons. The tracks are shorter in this version than in previous games, and there is a little less of the roller-coaster feeling, but these dense little courses are still filled with great corners and scenery. You really have to know the tracks to compete, and adding weapons on top of this challenge just elevates the game to another level. It's challenging and furious fun, made only better by multiplayer. **Michael Hobbs**

PSP — Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

You couldn't wish for a better portable version of Need for Speed than this. From the configurable list of recording artists in Pocket Trax—where you can edit the soundtrack to your liking and watch licensed videos—to the depth of circuit play and car customization, Rivals is the perfect PSP companion for EA's street racing legend. Assailing the novice, pro and master circuit ranks, the name of the game is upgrading, while competing against a rambunctious four-car pack and each circuit's rival in wave after wave of variations on the game's impressive metropolitan themes. You'll find a myriad of upgrades in line with what you've come to expect from console racers, with deep tuning, exterior customization and performance upgrades that translate realistically onto the track; it's definitely a new dawn for portable racing games. Rival's visuals, as we've already come to expect from PSP racing, are impressive to say the least—rife with reflective surfaces, big panoramas and excellent car models—and the gameplay, although unforgiving, is nicely balanced, with victory hinging equally on tuning and driving skills. Thankfully, you can Lap Knockout and Rally Relay within each circuit to earn points, which is highly recommended, as how well and fast you upgrade is key in seeing more of Rivals' radiant sights. Four-player head-to-head is a gas too. **Dave Halverson**

PSP — Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA
Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** March

Showcasing beautiful graphics, excellent audio and solid gameplay, MVP is the baseball game to get for the PSP. Although this version has been customized for the PSP, overall, this is the console version of MVP—it's amazing how much is in this title, and all translated perfectly to the PSP. Another nice feature is the optimized viewing angle, allowing players to see more of the field. Where other sports games have opted to take out some or all of the play-by-play commentary, MVP has it for every game you play, courtesy of Duane Kuiper and Mike Krukow. Unfortunately, there isn't a Franchise mode in MVP, but there is a great season mode, as well as an addictive Homerun Showdown. **Tom Ham**

NBA

PSP — Score

Developer: 989 Sports **Publisher:** Sony
Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** March

In typical 989 Sports form, they've developed a game that reads well on paper, but sadly, fails in its execution. Although the game has a variety of play modes and mini-games (and looks halfway decent), the core gameplay is sorely lacking. The biggest culprit: the control—especially with respect to shooting. For some odd reason, 989 decided to change the universal standard of the hold-and-release method that almost all basketball games use, instead requiring players to press the shoot button twice. Unnatural? Totally. Lay-ups and dunks are also extremely frustrating to execute. And when you throw in sub-par AI and lackluster sound, what you end up with is a basketball game not worth the box it came in. **Tom Ham**

Tiger Woods PGA Tour

PSP — Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

The venerable Tiger Woods series has made it onto the PSP, and the end result is nothing short of brilliant. While it is basically a modified version of Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004 (with some 2005 elements thrown in), it's still a solid sports title that any golf fan would be proud to own. Probably the greatest achievement for Tiger on the PSP is the implementation of the analog swing mechanic. Just pull back on the PSP's analog stick and push forward to execute a swing. The great Legend Tour will keep even the most seasoned golfer occupied for hours. Other features include Game Face functionality, a host of multiplayer modes (including an addictive Bingo Bango Bongo) and some of the prettiest graphics on the PSP. **Tom Ham**

World Tour Soccer

PSP — Score

Developer: 989 Sports **Publisher:** Sony
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

The best sports title out of Sony's stable of launch titles is, without question, World Tour Soccer. Much like its PS2 counterpart, it's easy to get into and a lot of fun to play. The game's biggest asset? The AI. Although not perfect by any means, the CPU is incredibly challenging. Not only do they pass effectively, but they set-up shots quite convincingly. Control is excellent. With a plethora of offensive and defensive moves, it's on par with the PS2 version. Sadly, there isn't a career mode, but a great Challenge Mode more than makes up for it. Visually, World Tour Soccer doesn't disappoint. Clean player animations and transitions have been improved over the PS2 version. The audio is also top notch—especially the eclectic soundtrack. **Tom Ham**

Rayman DS

Nintendo DS

Score: 7.0

Developer: UK Studios **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Multiplayer: None **Available:** March

While sandwiching Hoodlum Havoc into the DS is indeed impressive, we're met with two ways to play it: via the D-pad, which is akin to a root canal without the novocaine, or with the cereal box prize plastic thumb apparatus that, provided you can get comfy with it, is still a far cry from an actual analog stick. Hoodlum Havoc translates pretty well to the small screen otherwise, taking into accounts the reduced polys and textures, and the obvious fact that the game wasn't designed with a 2.5-inch screen in mind. Still, the cleverness and charm shine through thanks to a valiant port. As always, the Rayman universe is endlessly endearing and the gameplay model diverse and bursting with creativity. **Dave Halverson**

Retro Atari Classics

Nintendo DS

Score: 5.5

Developer: Tanko **Publisher:** Atari
Multiplayer: 4p versus **Available:** March

The name pretty much says it all. How good or bad you consider this collection largely hinges on how much nostalgic joy these ancient games can instill within you. Ten authentic ports are included in all—Pong, Centipede, Asteroids, Breakout, Warlords, Lunar Lander, Tempest, Sprint, Missile Command and Gravitar—and they'll either bring back those warm fuzzy feelings or make you wonder what the hell we were thinking back in the day (for me it was a lot of the latter). The optional graffiti-style updated graphics are pretty atrocious, but the new touch-screen controls are actually advantageous in games like Breakout while only causing frustration in others. Chances are, however, that you'll be bored senseless within an hour. **Chris Hoffman**

Pac-Pix

Nintendo DS

Score: 6.5

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco
Multiplayer: None **Available:** April

I had serious doubts about Pac-Pix when I first started playing it. I mean, come on—it's Pac-Man, only you're forced to draw Namco's iconic gobbling hero, as well as the walls that guide him, while he marches across the screen, devouring the mischievous ghosts as you guide him into their paths. Fortunately there's a little more to it than that—not much, but enough to keep things interesting and enjoyable in short bursts. Enemies and obstacles continue to evolve as you progress—the boss encounters are quite innovative and add a lot to the experience—and fortunately, your abilities evolve as well. It all adds up to a challenging drawing/action/puzzle game that delivers a unique take on a venerable classic. **Chris Hoffman**

Pokémon Dash

Nintendo DS

Score: 4.0

Developer: Umbrella **Publisher:** Nintendo
Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** March

Playing Pokémon Dash, I'm reminded of how detached Nintendo has become from the rest of the game-playing world. Scratch this, tap that. . . it's about as fun as homework. After the game lays down its stylus-based mandate—a deluge of pen prompts to negotiate direction and different abilities like drifting via balloons—it's off to the land of pencil-pushing where you wish you could see through your fingers to take in the mediocre visuals as you carry out the humiliating task of brushing a game screen with a pen like some deranged abstract artist. I hadn't played an all-stylus game until now, but having done so, I can officially state that I find it utterly joyless. Honestly, I prefer my other Nintendo gimmick, the Virtual Boy, over the DS by leaps and bounds. **Dave Halverson**

Rayman: Hoodlum's Revenge

Game Boy Advance

5.0 Score

Developer: Digital Eclipse **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Multiplayer: None **Available:** March

I'm not sure when developers decided that it was a good idea to take wonderful 3D platform games and translate them into an isometric perspective on GBA, but this has got to stop. What worked so well in the third dimension—and in eye-popping, jaw-dropping side-scrolling 2D before that—has become absolutely generic in this latest addition to the Rayman stable. Sure, you collect Lums, rescue Teensies, hurl your fists and use that bizarre tuft of hair to hover in classic Rayman fashion, but when you're doing it in such blandly designed levels, this game feels like it could be anything. Outside of occasionally problematic lock-on targeting, Rayman: Hoodlum's Revenge is a competent game, but it's also thoroughly forgettable. **Chris Hoffman**

Mario Party Advance

Game Boy Advance

3.5 Score

Developer: Hudson **Publisher:** Nintendo
Multiplayer: 4 players **Available:** March

The makers of Mario Party Advance really should try going to a party sometime, because the last time I checked, it wasn't a solitary endeavor. Yet, that's what the main game mode is in Mario Party Advance—a single player navigating the board, accomplishing small fetch quests and engaging in so-so minigames where you compete for a high score or battle a CPU opponent. The game is oddly structured and highly unforgiving, essentially forcing you to restart if you flub the minigame required to obtain more turns. Of course, you can compete against a friend in minigames outside of the main play mode, but what's the fun in that? Worse still are the "Gaddgets" that are your rewards—completely boring and devoid of any enjoyment. **Chris Hoffman**

Disney's Magical Quest 3 starring Mickey and Donald

Game Boy Advance

Preview

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom
Multiplayer: 2p co-op/versus **Available:** June

Following in the footsteps of games like Mega Man & Bass, Disney's Magical Quest 3 is another Capcom classic from the 16-bit era that would never have seen the light of day in the U.S. were it not for the GBA. As with its predecessors, beyond the kiddy exterior lies a solid platform game with a clever gameplay hook: the ability to change outfits on the fly, granting protagonists Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck new powers as a knight (where they can break obstacles and guard from projectiles), woodcutter (which lets them climb trees and slide down vines) or magician (offering magical shots with transformative powers). Seven themed levels ranging from the desert to the ocean are found here, as is co-op and versus play. **Chris Hoffman**

Mega Man Battle Network 5

Game Boy Advance

Preview

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom
Multiplayer: TBA **Available:** Spring

You knew he'd be back before long...yes, Mega Man has entered into the Battle Network yet again. Players of previous installments will feel right at home in MMBN5, exploring familiar locales and entering into trademark strategy/action battles where your choice of Battle Chips, combined with a bit of luck, will help keep the 'net safe from shady organizations such as Nebula—the villainous entity that's attempting to take over all of cyberspace this time out. As usual, two versions of the game will be available—Team Protoman and Team Colonel—each with different allies to befriend, Soul Unison power-ups to obtain and Battle Chips unique to each game. Other new features include Liberation Turf Battle Missions and informative Flashback Scenarios. **Chris Hoffman**

Wizards & Warriors

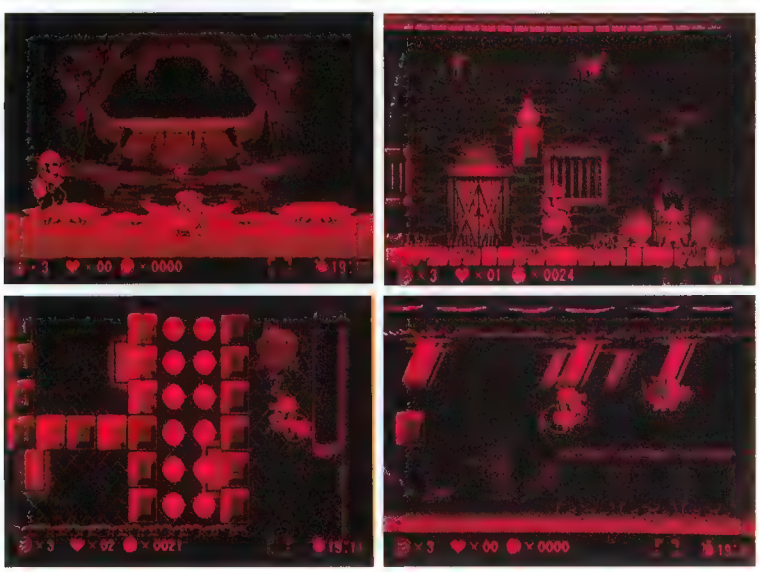
Before Conker...there was Kuros

Back in ancient times, as in long before Rare was recognized as one of the best developers on the planet, the UK-based company churned out loads of games on a regular basis, often for companies that today are little more than a memory, such as Tradewest and Acclaim. One such early console release was Wizards & Warriors, a medieval swords-and-sorcery adventure that pitted heroic knight Kuros against the malevolent wizard Malkil, who had captured the princess and conquered the kingdom of Elrond. Many elements that would later become Rare trademarks were found here, such as the emphasis on jumping challenges (Kuros sure had some leg strength!) and collecting items, specifically gems, a certain number of which needed to be acquired before you could open the door to the boss's lair. Wizards & Warriors also featured great music (well, except the insanely repetitive impending-death hymn) and a surprising number of RPG elements, in particular various equipment that could aid Kuros on his way, ranging from the chest-busting Boots of Force to the laughably useless Cloak of Darkness. One thing the game didn't have was Rare's familiar high difficulty, as you were granted infinite right-where-you-died continues in lieu of a save feature, but its depth still entranced gamers for hours at a time back when it was released. C. Hoffman

"Many elements that would later become Rare trademarks were found here..."

Wario Land

Big Red



The DS wasn't the first gizmo Nintendo ran human tests on. Not so long ago, they introduced the Virtual Boy, which remains one of my favorite systems to this day. Talk about immersion... So the games are red; you still can't find 3D like this anywhere on the planet. This technology in color would be my ultimate system. While I wait for hell to freeze over, the game I return to most (at least once a month for the last few years) is Wario Land—a 2D-in-3D first-party Nintendo action-platformer that has Wario leaping between the background and foreground, fighting bosses across chasms, sporting different hats for different tasks, ass mashing, dashing, swimming and everything else you'd expect from Nintendo, only in deeeeep 3D. The game is huge fun, never gets old and has a funky BGM that sticks in your head long after your eyes go back into focus. Screens can't duplicate the effect, but if you're so inclined, track down a VB and Wario Land, and you can thank me later. Dave Halverson

"So the games are red; you still can't find 3D like this anywhere on the planet."

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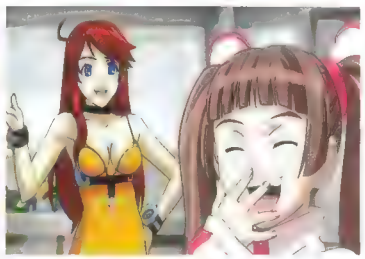
Burst Angel



Meet Jo, Meg, Amy and Sei. Together, they're cleaning up Tokyo, one demon at a time… well, for the most part; scumbags and giant mechs like to show up too. Working and living out of one seriously tricked-out urban assault vehicle/HQ, the only thing missing was a cook. You can hardly fight crime on an empty stomach. Enter unassuming culinary student extraordinaire Kyohei, and the character jambalaya is complete. The setup seems ripe for wanton fan service, I know, and there's a bit—just enough, actually—but *Burst Angel* is far deeper than all those perfectly round breasts might lead you to believe. Aside from an underlying theme that seems to be headed for a grand epiphany centered around, of all things, a glowing brain, *Burst Angel* is really about the characters' vastly different personalities and how they interact, or not, to get the job done. Jo is the mysterious one in the group—strong and silent, but also prone to violent outbursts and brutal honesty; she's also the ace pilot of Jengo, the team's on-demand mech, presented in lovely CG. Elsewhere, cute little Amy is the brains, able to hack into just about anything, including the traffic grid, to quickly route Jengo wherever Jo needs it at a moment's notice (she's a bit of a brat too); Meg is the spunky, reckless optimist in the group, not to mention a fierce warrior; and Sei, the team leader, is the glue that holds them all together—cool, calm, in control and pretty much the reason Kyohei is alive, seeing as how Jo pretty much wants to kill him. Kyohei is pretty much along for the ride…and is it ever a bumpy road. His only saving grace is his cooking. If there's one thing these girls like outside of laying the smack down, it's a good meal. Produced by Gonzo, the union of CG and traditional animation is, of course, wicked cool, and the mecha, and especially character design, are, as you can see, spectacular. I'll have the spaghetti-Western-tinged mecha-action-comedy please! *Burst Angel* is sexy, intelligent and action-packed all at the same time. Dave Halverson

Burst Angel 9.5

Volume: 1

Character and mecha design is off the charts good. A gorgeous show.

Token weak male character being dominated by strong sexy girls a bit worn. Kyohei needs to snap out of it.

Released by: FUNimation **Rating:** 13 and up
Running Time: 106 minutes **Available:** May 10

"Kyohei is pretty much along for the ride… and is it ever a bumpy road."

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a goddess like you...
to be by my side...
always."
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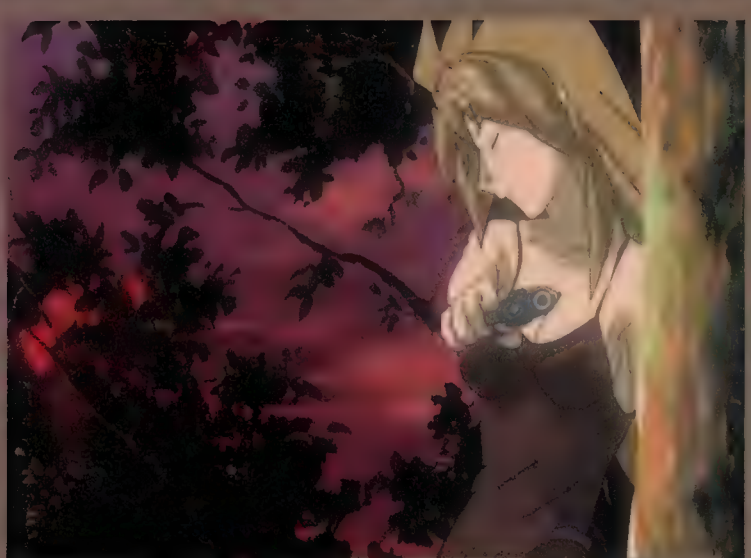
MADLAX

Solid Snake's got nothin' on Madlax



Nothing like an evening gown to make you feel pretty while you're offing the opposition.

ADV had me at "From the creators of Noir" with *MADLAX*, but what's inside exceeded even that ringing endorsement. The best way to preface *MADLAX*, especially in this here game magazine, would be to imagine Solid Snake if he was about 10 times cooler, deadlier...and a hot chick with a love for good pasta. Any female assassin willing to change into a slinky evening gown to take down an armored convoy moves directly to the top of my must-see list. Welcome to the art of combat like you've never seen it before, delivered in grand anime style; you'll want a *MADLAX* game, I guarantee it. But *MADLAX* isn't all girls and guns; a distinctively different parallel storyline is working its way into the story from an entirely different perspective as things shift from combat to the haunted, confused and all together odd aristocratic world of Margaret Burton, a wealthy high school student with more than her share of emotional baggage, a nosy neighbor, some pretty messed up vision and a picture book soaked in blood that seems to link her to *MADLAX*. I'll refrain from the obvious speculation, for now. *MADLAX* is a gorgeous new show, almost like two series in one, traditionally animated with an emphasis on detail—explosions, layered backgrounds and lighting are exceptional with an ever-present yet seamless layer of digital FX—that's also superbly produced in every respect. Dave Halverson

MADLAX 9.0

Esoteric as Noir, even more beautiful, and already completely mesmerizing.

I'm not sold on the whole Margaret storyline yet...but something tells me I will be.

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV 14
Running Time: 50 minutes **Available:** April 12

"...imagine Solid Snake if he was about 10 times cooler, deadlier...and a hot chick with a love for good pasta."

the Good, the Bad and the Beautiful

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V.1 DEATH'S ANGEL
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warning: purchasing this product will lead to experiencing intense scenes of western style gun fighting, robotic action and aggressive female lead characters.

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No shortage of breathtaking CG here.

APPLESEED

アップルシード

Appleseed gets a next-gen makeover

Masamune Shirow's vision knows no boundaries, evident in both the ongoing antics of Section 9 in *Ghost in the Shell* and now *Appleseed*, which holds up incredibly well all these years later as it makes the jump from late '80s animation to shiny new widescreen CG. The struggle facing the utopian (or so it would seem) city of Olympus between BioRoids—artificial clones who make up half of the population—and the remnants of humanity benefiting from their passive behavior, intelligence and work ethic, is one that in many ways mirrors our own. Not bad for an 18-year-old take on society where all seems extremely well, until humanity's thirst for domination and power rears its ugly head. At the center of this conflict we find the beautiful but deadly ESWAT soldier Deunan Knute, torn between her presumed-to-be lost love, now 75 percent cyborg, and a chain of events that will place her at the core of the struggle, holding all the cards—namely Appleseed. Derivative of the late '80s graphic novel and anime (Manga Ent., 1988), this feature-length film was stunning in theatres (reviewed in our Feb. 2005 issue) but translates even better to DVD via anamorphic widescreen extracted from the HD master, with English Dolby Digital 5.1, director and producer commentary, staff profiles and more. Dave Halverson

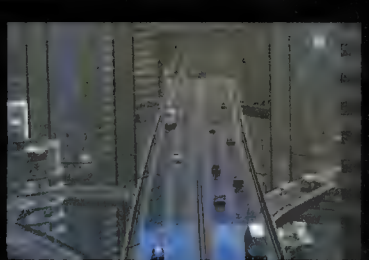
Appleseed 9.0

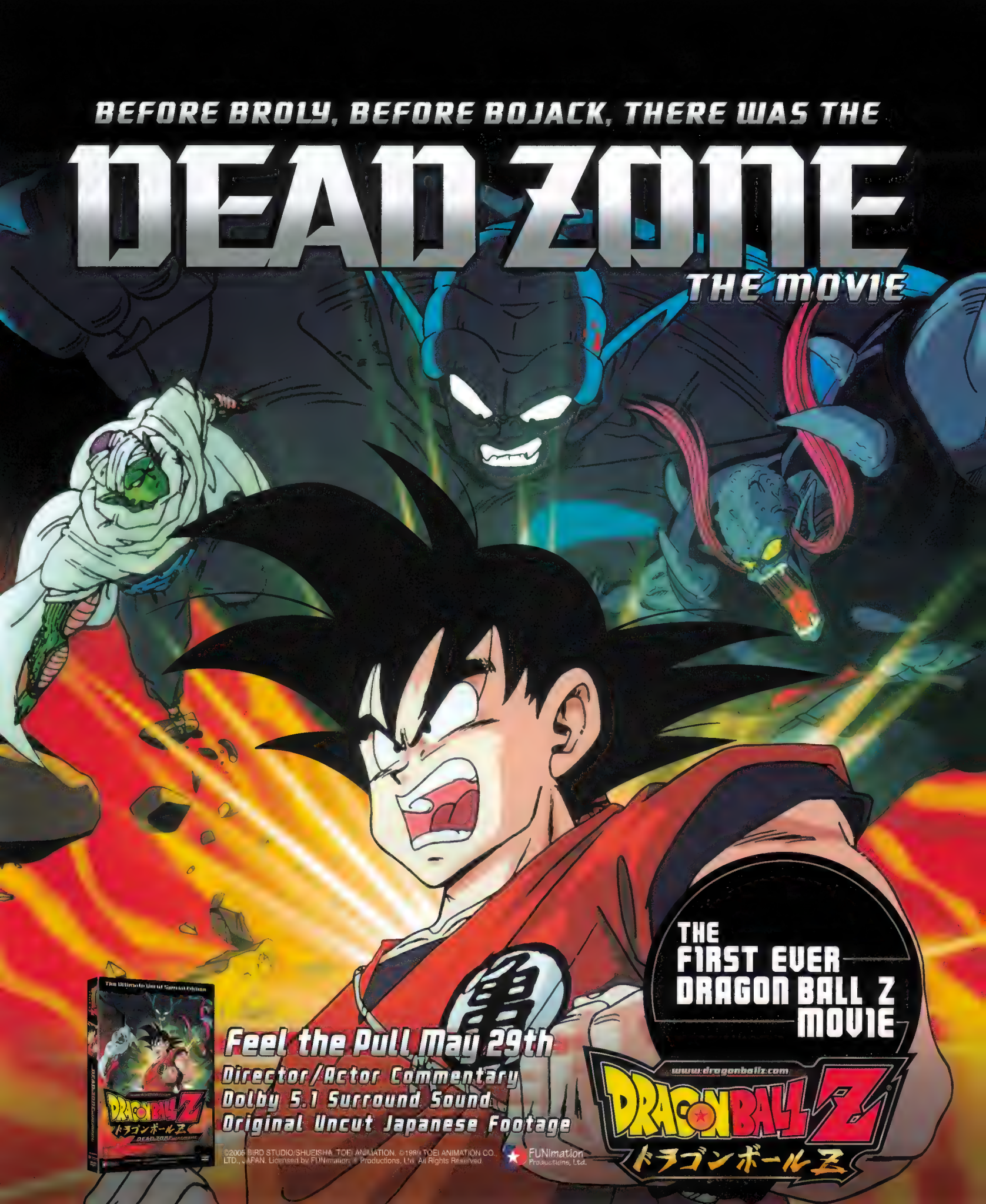
Absolutely gorgeous from end to end. Serious eye candy at work here and, though simple, a story well told.

Not a whole lot to dislike here. I'd have appreciated some nudity. Masamune Shirow always brings the nudity.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment **Rating:** R
Running Time: 103 minutes **Available:** May

"...humanity's thirst for domination and power rears its ugly head."

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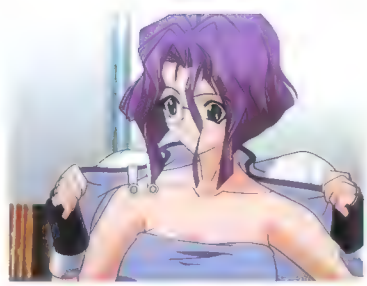
Daphne
in the Brilliant Blue

Female crime-busting is certainly nothing new to the annals of anime—from *Burn-Up* to *Bubblegum Crisis*, there's a ton of 'em—but *Daphne in the Brilliant Blue* is definitely one of the more unique among them. Maia Mizuki's lot in life was supposed to be fulfilling her lifelong dream as a member of an elite oceanic society, which is where we find her at the top of her class as episode 1 gets underway, during the once-a-year tryouts to lock down a spot in the prestigious organization. In a suspicious and most unfortunate twist of fate, however, while lesser students around her make the grade, Daphne is rejected, and having given up her residence—where she laid her dearly departed grandfather to rest just a year before—finds herself destitute and vulnerable...until she witnesses a crime in progress and ends up working for the apprehending party: the Nereide Organization's Kamchatka branch—a mercenary-for-hire agency made up of near-naked female operatives that specialize in everything from pulling cats out of trees to top-secret investigations. Of course, Maia finds herself on the bottom of the food chain, collecting past-due rent from deadbeats and performing menial tasks...when she's not on maid detail. A strange turn of events for such a promising aquatic prospect—something is most definitely amiss, I'm just not sure what, as the initial four episodes tend to focus on agency business; where things get really weird is towards the end when Gloria, the *real* branch manager, shows up with a major bone to pick, and the bombs—and boobs—to do it. Somber at first, funny towards the end and sexy in between, *Daphne in the Brilliant Blue* is off to a promising start. Dave Halverson

"...she witnesses a crime in progress and ends up working for the apprehending party..."

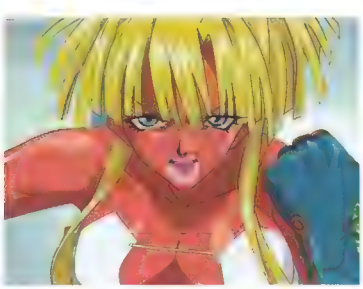


Daphne in the Brilliant Blue — B.0

One of the coolest team-based anime in a while, and a theme that seems to be going places.

A few overly hokey/sappy situations. Daphne is best when it sticks to the sexy, funny, or down and dirty.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment **Rating:** 16 & up
Running Time: 100 minutes **Available:** March



Gloria shows up at volume's end...yum.

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A Tree of Palme

Puppet tears

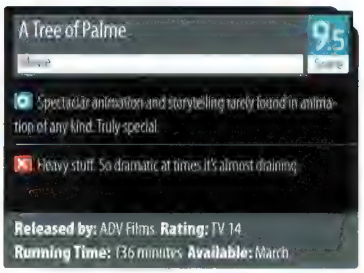
The seven years it took *Akira* animation director Takashi Nakamura to bring *A Tree of Palme* to life is visible in every frame of this adult fairytale—not only in the theatrical-quality animation but in the underlying subtext that changes cadence with subtle abandon as it slowly reveals an inner complexity seldom fathomed in animation. I suppose the only comparisons would be to works of either Satoshi Kon or Hayao Miyazaki—indeed the highest order of animated drama and fantasy. This is one of those stories that revolves around a central character but picks up passengers along the way, almost all of which are sympathetic in some way.

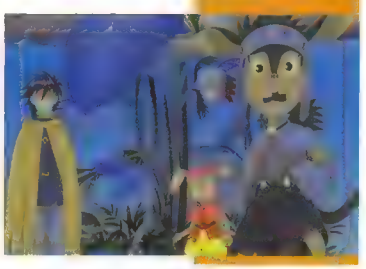
At the heart of it, though, is Palme—a Pinocchio-like puppet created to care for a sick woman, Xian—thrust into a world-altering chain of events when he's chosen to deliver what appears to be a cataclysmic device, The Egg of Touto, from the sand-covered frontier of his home in Arcana to the energy core of this amazingly diverse universe. His sadness is broken only by illusions of Xian, long dead and his only reason for living, until he finds solace in the notion of becoming whole, spurred on by his new love, a troubled young girl rejected by her evil mother, who finds comfort in Palme after nearly killing him. Ultimately, things we see on the surface aren't much of an indication of what's really at play here—revelations are saved for the end, and even then *A Tree of Palme* requires repeat viewings—as more and more lives become intertwined leading up to the mystifying finale.

"...it slowly reveals an inner complexity seldom fathomed in animation."

As beautiful a story this is, and as brilliantly animated, the art is truly extraordinary. You'll not see a more gloriously imagined fantasy universe. It's like diving into a Roger Dean painting that changes texture on the fly. Rarely does animation have this dramatic an effect, but when it does, it's beyond special, which pretty much defines *A Tree of Palme*.

Dave Halverson


A Tree of Palme
9.5
Spectacular animation and storytelling rarely found in animation of any kind. Truly special.
Heavy stuff. So dramatic at times it's almost draining.
Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV 14
Running Time: 136 minutes Available: March



Palme's fellow travellers look on in amazement.

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Samurai Champloo
Released by: Geneon Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 2
The coolest, hip-hop

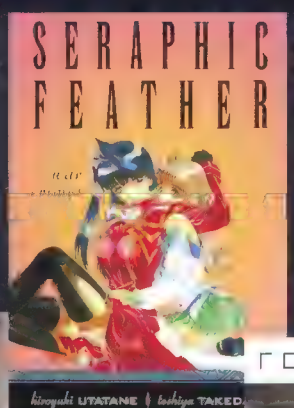
The Five Star Stories
Released by: ADV Films
Remastered and presented in original Japanese with English subtitles,

producer notes and the original Japanese promo video.

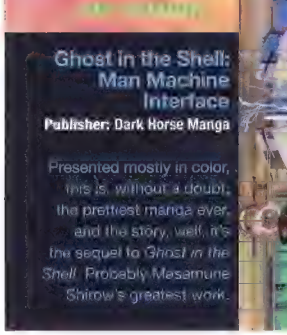
The Daichis: Earth's Defense Family
Released by: Geneon Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 2 - "Debt Doomed"

read this

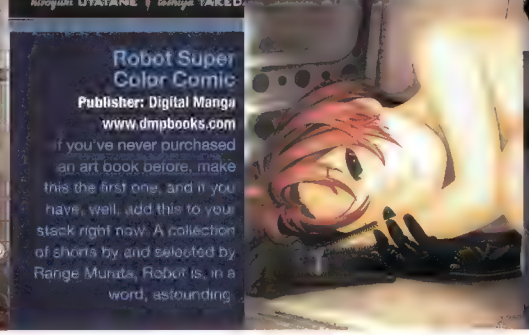
Oh My Goddess
Publisher: Dark Horse Manga
Now Reading: "Sora Unchained"
Action, comedy, romance, and hopped-up go-kart racing...with a supernatural assist from Belldandy, of course. Graphic novels don't get any better.



Seraphic Feather
Publisher: Dark Horse Manga
Now Reading: Volume 1
Interstellar action and intrigue that jumps off the page. The sexiest science-fiction graphic novel going comes to a climactic close.



Ghost in the Shell: Man Machine Interface
Publisher: Dark Horse Manga
Presented mostly in color, this is, without a doubt, the prettiest manga ever, and the story, well, it's the sequel to *Ghost in the Shell*. Probably Masamune Shirow's greatest work.



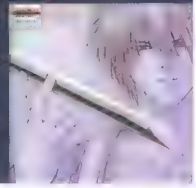
Robot Super Color Comic
Publisher: Digital Manga
www.dmpbooks.com
If you've never purchased an art book before, make this the first one, and if you have, well, add this to your stack right now. A collection of shorts by and selected by Range Murata, Robot is, in a word, astounding.

listen to this

Song for Ritsuko Fruits Basket -Four Season-
Publisher: Geneon Music
Think anime music is fruity, huh? Well, this is, but hey, it's in the name... besides, this CD will make you happy if not a little sleepy.

Maonlight Memoirs Lunar Legend Tsukihime OST 2
Publisher: Geneon Music
LLT OST 2 somehow is as good as LLT OST 1, which, roughly translated, means mesmerizing and enchanting, provided you like classical arrangements.

La Fillete Revolutionnaire Utena
Publisher: Geneon Music
Rock out to the cutesy that is Utena, dirge by freakish dirge. English translations and a few melancholy arrangements invite the adventurous.



Samurai Deeper Kyo OST: Capriccio
Publisher: Geneon Music
The legendary samurai series is audible bliss; fan or not, this is a great instrumental journey from its metal chops to arrangements as subtle as Kyo's silent scamper.

SCRAPPED PRINCESS

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Nausicaä**	*buena vista home entertainment*
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03	**Spirited Away**	*buena vista home entertainment*
04	**Princess Mononoke**	*buena vista home entertainment*
05	**Castle in the Sky**	*buena vista home entertainment*
06	**Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence**	*dreamworks*
07	**Lady Death**	*adv films*
08	**Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust**	*urban vision*
09	**Inu Yasha Movie 2**	*viz, llc*
10	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
02	**Gunslinger Girl**	*funimation productions*
03	**Gantz**	*adv films*
04	**Fullmetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
05	**MADLAX**	*adv films*
06	**Maburaho**	*adv films*
07	**Tenjho Tenge**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**Scrapped Princess**	*bandai entertainment*
09	**Paranoia Agent**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*

your megastore beckons!

Castle in the Sky
buena vista

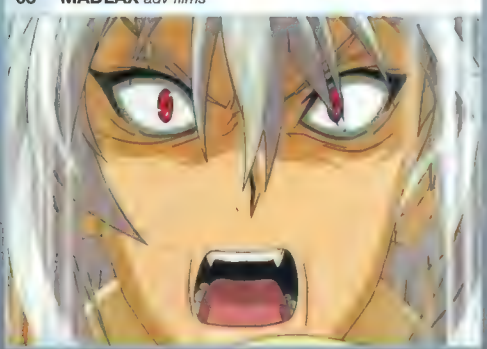
Soar into yet another re-mastered Miyazaki epic.

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex V4
bandai/manga

Section 9 is onto something big. SAC somehow keeps getting better.

Dave Halverson

01	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
02	**Gantz**	*adv films*
03	**Gunslinger Girl**	*funimation productions*
04	**Maburaho**	*adv films*
05	**MADLAX**	*adv films*

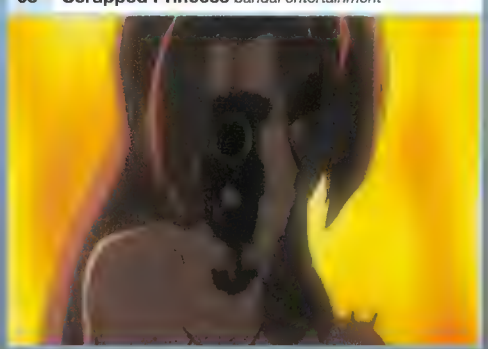


Deidoki

01	**Azumanga Daioh**	*adv films*
02	**Hana Yori Dango**	*viz, llc*
03	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Saikano**	*viz, llc*
05	**Midori Days**	*anime works*

Melvin Lui

01	**MADLAX**	*adv films*
02	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
04	**Daphne in the Brilliant Blue**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Scrapped Princess**	*bandai entertainment*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**Fullmetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
02	**Gundam SEED**	*bandai entertainment*
03	**Gantz**	*adv films*
04	**Paranoia Agent**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**GITS: Man Machine Interface**	*dark horse manga*
02	**Oh My Goddess**	*dark horse manga*
03	**Warcraft**	*tokyopop manga*
04	**Trigun Maximum V3**	*digital manga/dark horse manga*
05	**Sokora Refugees**	*tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**Samurai Deeper Kyo Capriccio**	*geneon anime music*
02	**Moonlit Memoirs OST 2**	*geneon anime music*
03	**Memories**	*geneon anime music*
04	**Sound Wave of Stellvia**	*geneon anime music*
05	**Sonic Heroes OST**	*geneon anime music*

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Cannon Busters

Part video game, part anime, part hip-hop...one very cool comic

LeSean Thomas is a rising star in the world of animation and illustration. Having worked on several high-profile projects, he's finally put the finishing touches on his first solo project, Cannon Busters, a gamer's dream comic if there ever was one (since Battle Chasers). LeSean also contributed Gum and Serena to our Girls of Gaming V2, so keep those issues wrinkle-free!

Dave Halverson

Interview

LeSean Thomas, creator/artist, Cannon Busters

play: So tell us about your latest, Cannon Busters. This one is all you, right?
LeSean Thomas: As far as creating, writing and pencils go, yeah, this is basically all me. Cannon Busters is the fantasy story of Samberry, a royal Companion droid who's trying to get back home. Having never experienced interaction outside her kingdom's walls, it all goes askew when she's violently separated from her owner and kingdom due to an attack from a mysterious and powerful sorcerer during a time where magic is extinct. Along her journey, she comes across the paths of three other individuals who also wish to get to where she's headed, but for their own reasons. It's like a smoked-out version of the *Wizard of Oz* meets Breath of Fire meets *FLCL* meets hip-hop. The spine of the story is very high-concept, but of course it's the journey and the characters that will make it unique. I've done a lot of work for other publishers. Mostly for the late Dreamwave Productions. But yeah, this is my baby. It's been a long time in the making.

What inspired it? Sure has an adventure-RPG look about it...reminds me of one of my all-time favorites, the notoriously late but hella cool Battle Chasers.
Notoriously late? Hella cool? Wait, that sounds like Cannon Busters! Ha ha! Yeah, it's definitely an action-adventure. Definitely RPG. Think *Fooly Cooly*, Capcom's Breath of Fire, a slight dash of *Dead Leaves* and a side of Final Fantasy. Ha ha.

Is this your first solo effort?
In comics? Yep.

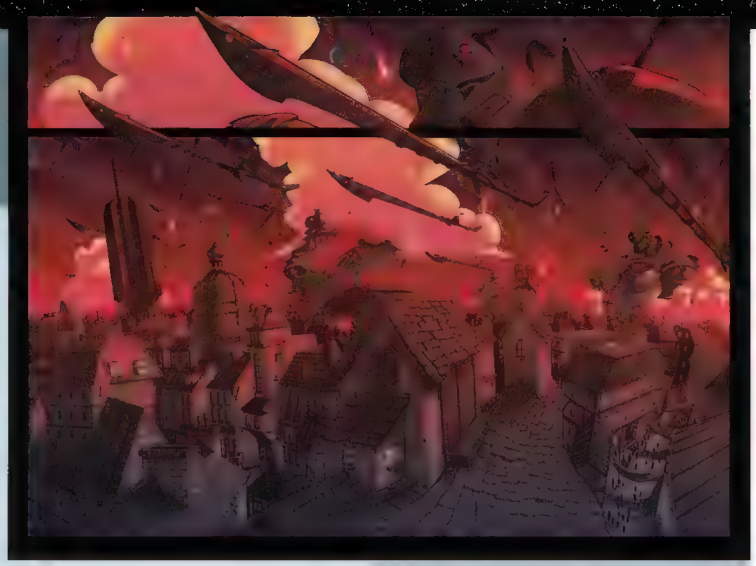
What role did acclaimed writer J. Torres play?
J. Torres (Teen Titans Go!, Love as a Foreign Language) handles the scripts for CB. He's taken my entire outline for this miniseries and broken it down into readable scripts. He's a genius. Also a great human being.

How long does a project like this take? What's the average time you spend on penciling each page? Is there much R&D involved?
Well, it's *supposed* to take about a month per book when planned ahead enough. This particular series is bi-monthly. That's more time for me to put more into it. I put in about a page and a half every two days. I'm taking my time. There's been about two years of R&D preparing the series.

I really wanted to find a way to put together a fantasy story where I could take all the cool things I love—anime, manga, hip-hop, video games, westerns, sci-fi and samurai—and blend them all in a zany way. Cannon Busters is my *Kill Bill*. I'm basically trying to pull a Tarantino with the fantasy genre!

Talk to me about this coloring. All of Udon's books look gorgeous. What's the secret? Is there a software standard for color? What sets a great colorist apart?
Well, just to be clear, the colorist for the Cannon Busters mini-series is über-talent Stuart Ng, a former Dreamwave Productions studios colorist. Dreamwave Productions was also known for carrying some of the industry's best colorists. Stuart comes from the top of that pack with some of Dreamwave's top-selling books with his work on such titles like War Lands, Devil May Cry, Mega Man, Transformers Energon and SandScape. Udon's very own Arnold Tsang colored my wraparound cover though, an extremely sick piece as well.

I think what separates a great colorist from the rest of the kids out there with a brush tool is someone who enhances the penciler's work without going on a tangent and smothering it with flash and flair. A colorist who knows his color wheel and color theory well can use three or four flat colors as a special effect without over-rendering. Someone who knows when to say "when" and stop. ha ha. Stuart has that. Like Jeff Matsuda and Dave McCaig, he



JUST "FRIENDS?"
WHAT'S, WHAT'S THE MATTER, TOJI?
DID I SAY SOMETHING WRONG?
WELL... I MEAN... IT'S JUST...
WE'VE KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE I WAS A CHILD...
...AND YOU WERE FIRST ASSIGNED TO ME... NO ONE KNOWS ME LIKE YOU DO... AND YOU MEAN THE WORLD TO ME...
SO...
-AHEM:-
PRINCE TOJI. THE KING REQUIRES YOUR PRESENCE IN THE GREAT HALL.
NOW.
OF COURSE. THANK-YOU, O'DIN.

and I have a sort of "flow" when it comes to collaborations that just works so well together. He understands my lines and we think very similar in terms of what's cool and what animes we watch and what inspires us… Stuart's also an awesome draftsman. I think a colorist who can actually *draw* is a *huge* bonus to coloring because they know what works and what doesn't. They aren't just filling in blanks. They are sculpting over your lines.

What artists have inspired you thus far in your career?

Oh man. Too many, Dave. Mainly foreign artists in animation...a few comic artists from the states. Jeff Matsuda, Paul Pope, Yoshihiko Umakoshi (*Street Fighter Alpha: The Movie* character designer), Kazuto Nakazawa (*Samurai Champloo* designer), Masami Obari, Takeshi Koike (*Animatrix: World Record, Dead Leaves*), Yasuomi Umetsu (*Kite, Mezzo Forte*), Koji Morimoto and Claire Wendling among many…

Those guys really keep me going. Animation is my first love. Those guys are just at the top of the game to me right now. I adore those artists. I can't wait to be in their shoes and produce and animate my own animated film.

What are some of your favorite comic book, cartoon and anime series currently running?

Ok, I'll be honest, I just got the "Naruto bug." Ha ha ha! I tried to ignore this series for so long. I wrote it off as just another long-ass *Dragon Ball Z* series, something that I'd need to watch all 5,000 episodes in order to get the full enjoyment of the series... But Naruto is just genius. I'm currently up to volume five of the American mangas and I'm a fiend. I'm hooked!!!

Wow, Naruto was an entire paragraph, ha ha! Ok, I'll keep it short: Blade of the Immortal and anything by Paul Pope.

Regarding anime, it would have to be *Samurai Champloo*, *Final Fantasy Unlimited*, *Naruto*, *Last Exile*, *FullMetal Alchemist* and recently I saw *Steam Boy*, *Appleseed*, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*…just jaw-dropping stuff. And currently *The Boondocks* as an animated series in the states.

You've worked on TMNT, Darkstalkers and Street Fighter. What was your involvement in those series?

I worked with Dreamwave Productions as the penciler for a new TMNT series. I produced about 8 issues of TMNT animated, a comic series based off of the new animated series on FoxKids. It was a lot of fun. The cool part about that gig was that I illustrated a four-page short story inside the PS2, Xbox and GameCube TMNT games' instruction manuals that was released in late 2003. The coolest feature in that game was the art gallery, where, if you collected enough scrolls throughout the game, you can actually collect the entire 22-page issue #1 of TMNT animated that I penciled! It was pretty ill to see my work in a video game. I'm hoping it's a continuing thing, my work and video games, I mean, heh!

I also penciled a guest cover for Udon's Street Fighter #9 and a special eight-page back-up story featuring Sagat and Adon, fighting for the muay thai championship! It was bananas! I hear it was well received. I also just recently did an alternate cover for Darkstalkers #2 and a four-page back-up story featuring the origin of Jon Talbain! Definitely check it out. It's pretty fun.

"Cannon Busters is my Kill Bill. I'm basically trying to pull a Tarantino with the fantasy genre!"

LeSean Thomas, creator/artist, Cannon Busters

How'd you get into the business? Were you into comics as a kid? If so, what are some of your favorite series?

My background is in animation. I just started drawing comics in 2002. I got into comics from an email from Dreamwave Productions' own Pat Lee. He saw my work I posted online and offered me a shot to do my own series (which, at the time, was Cannon Busters!). That first work was a book called Arkanium. That work got me the TMNT gig. I was totally into comics as a kid. I was really into collecting when I was 15. Rob Liefeld, Jim Lee, Marc Silvestri, Denys Cowan. All those guys were my heroes coming into the game. I was a huge fan of Deathlok as a kid, penciled by Denys Cowan.

What does it take to get a comic book published and distributed these days? Is it all about the quality, who you know or a little of both?

I think it's definitely a little of both. Nowadays it's so hard. The competition is fierce if you're trying to get work at the big two, Marvel and DC. But really, if you want to do your own comic, just do it. There are a lot more options nowadays than there were when I was coming up. There definitely was no internet when I was 14, ha ha ha. I had to do everything through snail mail packages, You know what I'm talking about!

Nowadays you have publishers like Image, Devil's Due, and a slew of other indie publishers who, with the right work/story/pitch, will get you a publishing gig to get your own stuff out there.

What about numbers? What's the target for a new title like Cannon Busters?

Cannon Busters is a niche title. It's catered to a specific audience. The video game, teen and anime/manga crowd. Of course, that crowd is growing with the emergence of moguls like Tokyo Pop and Shonen Jump. It's up to the retailers and the readers. If they want a book like Cannon Busters, they simply have to ask their retailer to order it. Nowadays, most retailers don't often take a chance on a new, niche book like CB, because it's not considered a "regular" title. Regular, meaning books like X-Men, Spider-

"It's a hip-hop samurai-action-drama manga. It's going to be my best work ever...and I'm my own worst critic, so that's saying a lot!"

–Sean Thomas, creator/artist, Cannon Busters

Man...you know...the mainstream titles. CB is an indie book. Its audience is small in comparison, so retailers may not order as much as say a book that will guarantee a sale like X-Men. If you are a fan of *Fooly Cooly*, console RPGs and manga, Cannon Busters is up your alley.

How's it been working with Udon/Devil's Due?
I love those guys. They have been incredibly patient and I have nothing but praise for them. I'd like to thank Erik Ko and Josh Blaylock for their patience and giving this book a shot. I'm sure it won't disappoint if fans stick with it.

They're known for creating comics from game properties. Any chance Cannon Busters might work in the other direction and spawn a game? Is that something you hope for, or are you strictly about comics?
Oh hell yeah, Dave! I'm all about creating a "proof of concept." Something that can be used not only to read, but as a platform to help step into other media, be it games, animation or toys. I think comic books are a great and cheap way to create a tangible property that you can use to pitch to other companies in other media.

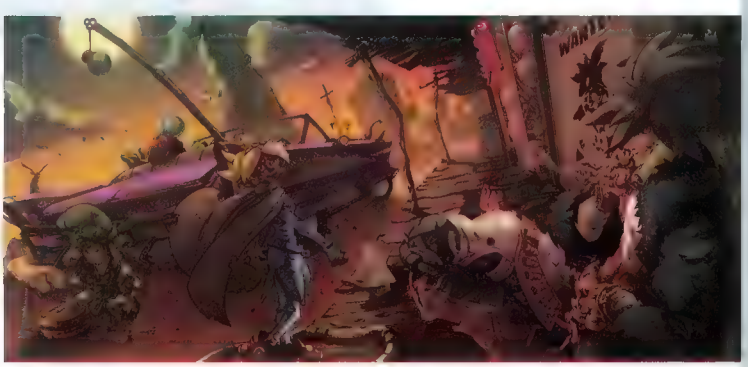
I'm a fanboy and an artist at heart, but I'm also a businessman. I know the value in a property. I think Cannon Busters is definitely a potential winner in multimedia crossover appeal. That's definitely the goal. I mean, I'm a child of hip-hop, anime and games. We're from the Sega Master System generation. We know what's up, ha ha. You can look at the characters from Cannon Busters and can already tell that I've designed them with toys, animation and video games in mind. The story is high-concept and easy to get into.

I definitely have a video game in mind. Action-RPG or a straight up turn-based RPG. I definitely see it being produced for PS2, Xbox or GameCube. I'm thinking of it as an OVA as well. I can already imagine it being produced by Gainax, Gonzo/Bone Studio or Production I.G. I've designed it in that fashion.

Are you into video games? The Gum you did for our GoG V2 issue would certainly lead us to believe so!
Without question. My video game love shown above makes me guilty. I'm a huge game fan. If it were possible, I'd love to do game development. I think my stuff lends itself well to game design. Right now Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater is kicking my behind, ha ha ha. I also wanna get my hands on DMC3. Haven't tried that yet. I hear it owns.

Ever fiddle with any CG or other artistic mediums?
Yep. Traditional animation is my big favorite. It's my first love. I've been working in animation for close to six years now, from MTV to Showtime to Disney, Warner Bros. and now at Sony Pictures Animation. I'm working in animation as we speak. I've even animated some of the characters from Cannon Busters for a flash-animated intro, Capcom-style for the www.cannonbusters.com website. I'm having a blast doin' my own thing.

Your architectural designs remind me a lot of the neo-steam age stuff we see in anime and games like Grandia, with a hint of old world/colonial style. To what do you accredit the look of Cannon Busters?
Good eye! I'd say Steam Detectives, Mega Man, Final Fantasy and the Lunar series as main influences. I also tried to do a little research in German ghettos and streets in Paris/France and London. I definitely wanted to try my best to combine some neo-steam feels to the locations in the first issue. Give them a livable organic look, but without getting too realistic. There's a wonky fun to it all. I tried my best to not get too realistic. Like a traditional RPG, the story of Cannon Busters starts in one location, and as each issue is released, the characters are introduced to new locations and enemies. The city images you see in issue #1 are from the Kingdom of Botica: a vast kingdom of wealth where human-like droids, nicknamed "Assistants," are very popular. The main character, Samberry, is such a droid, but of royal status. She's "special." The story begins with her. Her home is kingdom of Botica, a twisting, winding city of old world infrastructure: cobblestoned streets, chimney rooftops and steam-powered machinery. There's a plethora of genres in CB—Westerns, feudal Japan, Aztec approaches and European and Egyptian themes. I wanted to cover all the bases and still make it fun. Each character will represent a genre and place in time. A motley crew if you will. But trust me, it'll all work.



How long of a series is Cannon Busters? What might we see from you next? Working on any new TV projects?
Cannon Busters is an eight-issue, bi-monthly miniseries. I plan to release a trade paperback book collecting the first four issues, and a trade collecting the last four. After that's done, I have a one-shot action parody comic with J. Torres based on kung fu legend Bruce Lee. After that, I can finally sit down and focus on my original graphic Novel, "Drama Kingz," which I'm currently negotiating for with Tokyo Pop. It's a hip-hop samurai-action-drama manga. It's going to be my best work ever...and I'm my own worst critic, so that's saying a lot! Ha hah! It's definitely gonna be fun and open people's eyes to new ways of portraying my culture outside of what's popular in the mainstream. It's what happens when you get a kid who eats, sleeps and craps hip-hop culture while reading Naruto and Blade of the Immortal on the can. Ha!

As for television projects. I'm doing it up huge this year! I'm currently the supervising character designer for the highly anticipated *The Boondocks* animated series based off famous creator Aaron McGruder's politically and racially charged comic strip of the same name. *The Boondocks* airs this fall on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim. It's going to change the game...seriously, somebody's gonna be mad this fall, ha ha!

Doing anything special for Comic-Con this year?
Yep, look for me doing the signing at Devil's Due's and Udon's booths for Cannon Busters #1 and #2. Also something a little extra that I can't reveal just yet! You'll see!

We'll see you there!
Thanks a lot for having me Dave. See you at E3!!!! **play**

Sideways

Starring: Paul Giamatti, Thomas Haden Church, Virginia Madsen
Director: Alexander Payne
Released By: Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: R

If you haven't seen *Sideways* yet, shame on you. Few movies in recent memory have had such a profound effect on contemporary popular culture. Almost overnight, wine has become cool. Wine sales in this country have surged to an all-time high. People at bars and restaurants around the country are ditching their beer bottles for glasses of Pinot Noir. All due to the influence and genuine affection generated by this simple, extremely likable comedy. Winner of the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, *Sideways* follows long-time friends Miles and Jack, played by Paul Giamatti of *American Splendor* and Thomas Haden Church, recently cast as Sandman in *Spider-Man 3*, as they travel to California's central coast wine country for one final adventure before Church's character marries. The pair is joined by Maya and Stephanie, played by Virginia Madsen and Sandra Oh, who compel the two to contemplate past failures and reevaluate future plans. The film is both poignant and extremely funny, and it will make you thirsty.
Extras: There's nothing that exciting here, but who cares? Let's face it; this is not a movie you're buying for the extras. Included are the theatrical trailer, deleted scenes, a behind-the-scenes featurette and full-length audio commentary by Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church.
Michael Eisenberg
Movie: A **Extras:** C+

Elektra

Starring: Jennifer Garner, Goran Visnjic, Kirsten Prout, Will Yun Lee
Director: Rob Bowman
Released By: Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: PG-13

I held out hope for *Elektra*, just as I did *Catwoman*. Unfortunately, the results here are even more tragic. So disconnected, nonsensical and downright humiliating is *Elektra* that for the first time I might have actually had to leave the theater, else suffer the wrath of shooshers (and the odd *Alias* fan) for laughing out loud—likely right after *Elektra*'s reluctant, self-centered agent essentially forgets who he's been playing the duration of the film and decides to sacrifice himself for no apparent reason… or perhaps upon discovering that Elektra doesn't know whether she's troubled, anal, vulnerable or just plain hopeless. She's untouchable…but not… She's a loner, but she'll stay for dinner… She's perceptive, but everyone's punking her… By the end of this film, Elektra (who dons the red twice and looks utterly ridiculous for it) is, sadly, a joke. And why can she move at the speed of sound, except during the horribly choreographed fights (all two of them)? Either you're *Mortal Kombat* or *Enter the Dragon*; fantasy or reality. Instead we get Crouching Tiger, Hidden Bed Sheets in the drop-dead funniest final fight ever put on film. *Kung Pow*'s got nothing on Bob the bed-sheet Bowman. And let us not forget those token mystical bad guys whose CG-drenched lethal attacks move like lightning but take forever to reach their target! Seemingly lethal maneuvers that fall prey to hokey kung fu and happenstance: action! Sure it's based on a comic book, but give the audience a wee bit of credit. *Hellboy* and *Spider-Man* are proof it can be done. *Elektra* is so bad you have to see it. Judging by the extensive extras (Jennifer Garner was such a believer it's actually kind of sad), they really thought they had a franchise. Maybe they should have started with a plausible story. Dave Halverson
Movie: D- **Extras:** B

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events

Starring: Jim Carrey, Liam Aiken, Emily Browning, Timothy Spall, Catherine O'Hara, Meryl Streep, Bill Connolly
Directed by: Brad Silberling
Released By: Paramount Home Video
Rated: PG

Lemony Snicket's, like pretty much everything Jim Carrey has done since *The Mask*, is superb, if not an instant classic. If ever a series deserved or warranted numerous sequels this is it. Like *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, *Snicket's* is true to its source and its audience. One of a handful of American actors who warrant comparison to Hollywood legends like Jack Lemon, Jim Carrey is all over this movie and brilliant at every turn. The story is decidedly dark; a horribly horrible chain of events with the wickedest intentions woven together with such brilliant writing and gorgeous sets you feel as if you're being treated to something truly special, where most movies of this nature fall flat trying either too hard for the kiddies or slipping in pop culture gags for adults. *Snicket's* respects the gamut by doing neither, its elements of science, literature and dastardly deeds compounded by some of the most stunning sets ever seen. The fine detail in the craftsmanship is humbling. Liam Aiken, Timothy Spall (who's always amazing), Luis Guzman (ditto), Meryl Streep, Catherine O'Hara, Billy Connolly and Cedric the Entertainer are all amazing in their respective roles, and Emily Browning should be the next big thing.
Extras: Extras are extensive with 12 featurettes over the two discs, plus deleted scenes, outtakes and other fortunate events. Dave Halverson
Season: A- **Extras:** A-

The Woodsman

Starring: Kev'n Bacon, Kyra Sedgwick, Eve
Director: Nicole Kassell
Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
Rated: R

In a gut-wrenching scene in the bedroom of Walter's (Kevin Bacon) new lover Vickie (Kyra Sedgwick), she asks him to finally reveal—to us as well—his darkest secret. He is a child molester. *The Woodsman*, soundly and bravely directed by first-timer Nicole Kassell, pulls few punches. Its material is raw and disturbing, and there are moments where you may even wonder if the line has been crossed. But the only real crime of the film is its brushes with contrivance, draining the inherent poignancy from the material. Bacon, giving a tragic performance worthy of last year's Oscar, is the dark soul that keeps us glued, watching in discomfort a shameful man who knows better but remains a slave to his horrible sins.
Extras: Deleted scenes, director commentary, featurette.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B **Extras:** NA

Winifred Phillips

The Goddess of War

New to the scene, but well known to thousands for her XM and National Public Radio work, Winifred Phillips busts into gaming in grand fashion, blessing one of this year's finest titles, God of War, with scintillating orchestral tracks. Incorporating her ethereal music and vocals with the driving cattle hymns of Gerard Marino and Mike Reagan, Winifred certainly makes a good first impression.

play: God of War producers were pleased with your versatility on this soundtrack, as you delivered both the instrumental and vocal content. How difficult is it to write music for both of these elements?
Winifred Phillips: Listening to music is the key to writing it well. In the case of God of War, that music was a combination of really aggressive orchestral pieces and ancient ethnic music from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. I listened to as much as I could get my hands on—anything that could inspire me or teach me something I didn't know. As far as the vocal work goes, I'm a trained classical vocalist. One of the things I like to do on a really epic project like this is to overdub my voice. In God of War, I composed a lot of tracks that feature a women's chorus in which all the voices of the three-part harmony are performed by me. The sound of a women's chorus works really well for places in a game when things are meant to feel mysterious or full of wonder—and there are a lot of mysterious and wonderful places you get to visit in God of War! I also sing a 16-voice mixed chorus: women and men, in four-part harmony. I sing the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. Now, I've got a pretty wide vocal range, but there's no way I can sing the low notes of a bass part—I'd be a little worried if I actually *could* sing that low! I lower the pitch of my voice in Pro Tools, but only by three semitones, which is a very small difference. With a lot of experimentation, I've gotten it to the point where my tenor and bass sections are very convincing.

You were also tasked to perform the singing voice of the Siren character. What was it like, bringing this classic monster to life?
The Siren is one of Greek mythology's greatest man eaters, literally: she uses her singing voice to lure warriors close to her—she hypnotizes them with her song—and then she eats them. She's the original femme fatale. When the producers asked me to write and perform her song, I wrote a high soprano melody—really high—and I sang it with no accompaniment. In the game, the main character Kratos follows the Siren's song across the desert. I was really excited to have my music used as such an important part of the gameplay! As a composer you don't get many opportunities to have your work used as a gameplay mechanic, something crucial to the completion of a level. I'm really proud that I was asked to contribute something so important to the game.

Your musical sensibilities seem very well suited to God of War's overall era and theme. Are you a fan of epic fantasy and mythology?
I've been a great fan of fantasy and mythology ever since I was a kid. Growing up, I read all the big epic fantasy series and trilogies—Lord of the Rings, the Earthsea books, The Fionavar Tapestry, The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever—and I got a chance to write music for mythological stories while I was working with National Public Radio: Homer's Odyssey, Jason and the Argonauts, The Arabian Nights and Beowulf. I had a wonderful time exploring those worlds through music. There is something in fantasy and mythology with which everyone can relate, and that's what makes the stories timeless—whether written by Homer or George Lucas. Mythology and fantasy both present a heightened vision of reality: the characters are symbolic of big ideas about good and evil, and that makes them powerful. In God of War, David Jaffe has added his own spin to Greek mythology. His vision is very true to the core intentions of the original myths, but at the same time he makes his story extremely accessible and relevant, with a hard edge that makes everything feel real. The world of God of War is brutal, but in the context of the story, it would be wrong for that world to be presented in any other way!

"They wanted the soundtrack to include a variety of styles, including ambient-eerie music, aggressive and epic orchestral music. I love this kind of challenge."
Winifred Phillips, composer/vocalist, God of War

Thanks very much Winifred. And since God of War is your first game soundtrack, welcome to the industry. It's a wild and wacky place. Keep us posted on your next big title...
I will. It's in the works right now. High Voltage Software is developing it—I'm working with audio director Chadd Portwine—and that's all I can say for now, other than the fact that the game will be released this summer. Thank you, this was a lot of fun. **play**

gear

PSP Accessories

Nyko PSP Theater Experience, Charger Case and Screen Armor

www.nyko.com — Theater Experience: $79.99 Charger Case: $69.99 Armor: $9.99

There's a tirade of new PSP accessories hitting, but none so cool as Nyko's Theater Experience (A) and Charger Case (B). While both products will charge the PSP three times before needing a charge of their own, the TE has two speakers and an adjustable viewing angle for watching movies. The Screen Armor (C) is a good idea too.

Any PC Pad

Nyko Airflo EX PC controller

www.nyko.com — Price: $24.99

While having fans gently caress your hands during play is indeed pretty cool, what makes the Nyko Airflo EX PC controller king is software that allows you to map *any* game onto its 13 buttons. That and the fact that it's got good action on the analogs, clicky analog buttons and a solid quality feel all around. Call it the PC control pad solution that blows.

DLP Front Projector

Boxlight Raven DLP Projector

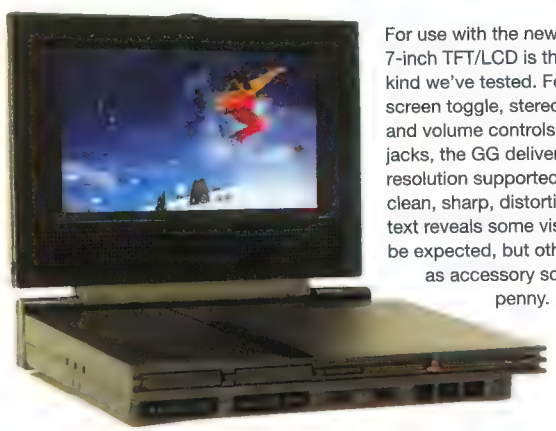
www.boxlight.com — Price: $1399

If you're looking for a high-resolution giant screen that doesn't cost as much as a car, the Raven is your solution. At $1399, the specs are impressive, supporting widescreen and progressive scan for the targeted Xbox user, although it performs equally as well with GameCube, PS2, DVD players and pretty much any other AV device. The Raven supports SXHA, XGA, SVGA, VGA and Mac resolutions, so it's truly a multipurpose workhorse. Raven is HDTV compatible, displays an image size from 30 to 200 inches diagonally and is geared for gaming. With a 2000:1 contrast ratio and DL technology, even the tiniest details are crystal clear. Even up close, images have no distortion or blur.

Slim PS2 LCD display

Pelican GameGlass 7" Hi-Res TFT/LCD screen

www.pelican.com — Price: $139



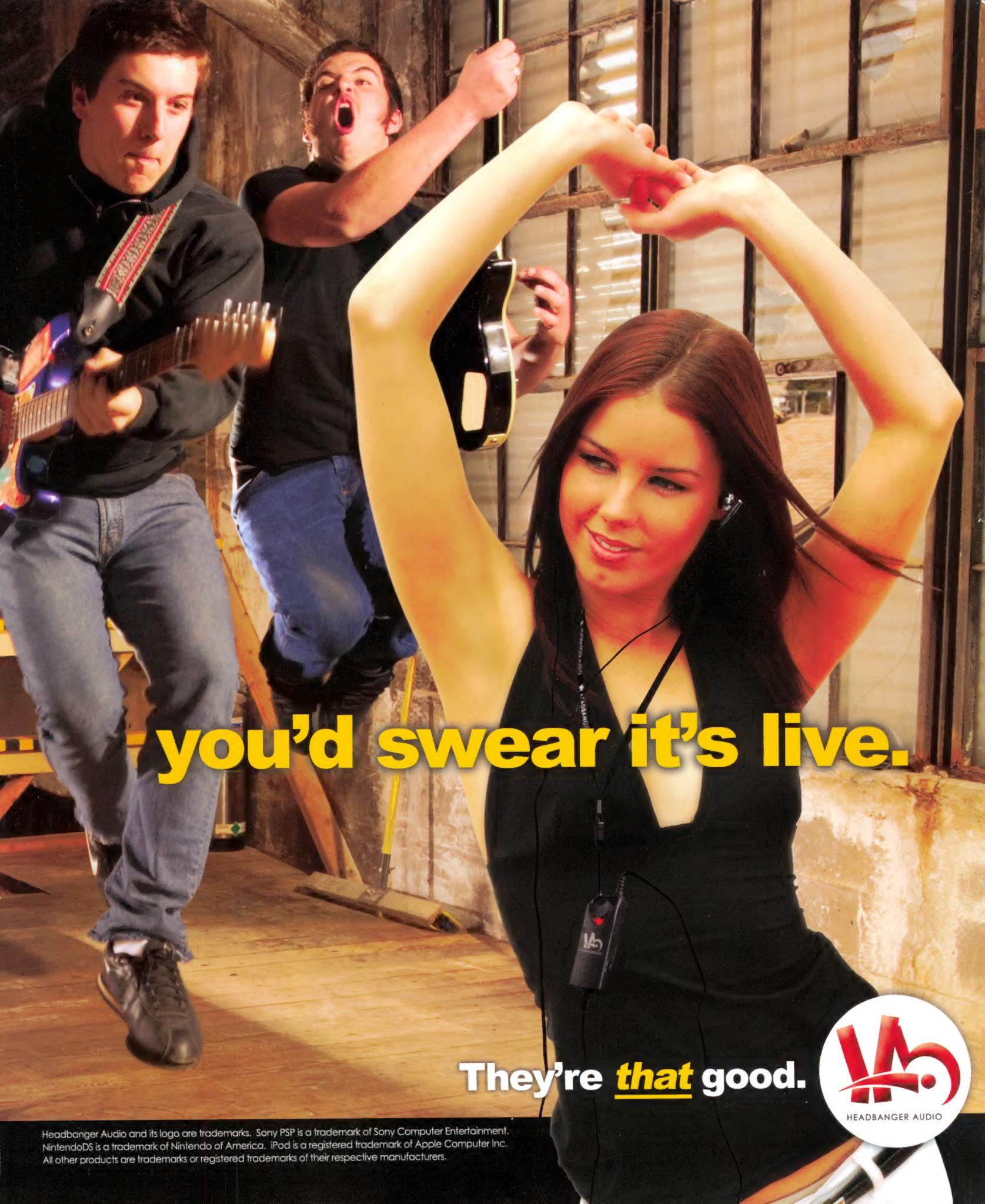
For use with the new, thin PS2, Pelican's new 7-inch TFT/LCD is the finest screen of its kind we've tested. Featuring widescreen/full screen toggle, stereo speakers, brightness and volume controls and dual headphone jacks, the GG delivers, as promised, the max resolution supported by PS2 (480x234) in a clean, sharp, distortion-free picture. Small text reveals some visible lines, which is to be expected, but otherwise this is as good as accessory screens get. Worth every penny.

Sound so huge,

Headbanger's EarSubs deliver studio quality sound with rich bass levels that far exceed other name brand earphones. Comfort engineered speed chamber technology collects and focuses the sound for a fuller and more accurate experience.

Compatible with Sony PSP, NintendoDS, Apple iPod, mp3 Players, PC, Home Audio and more...

www.headbangeraudio.com



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